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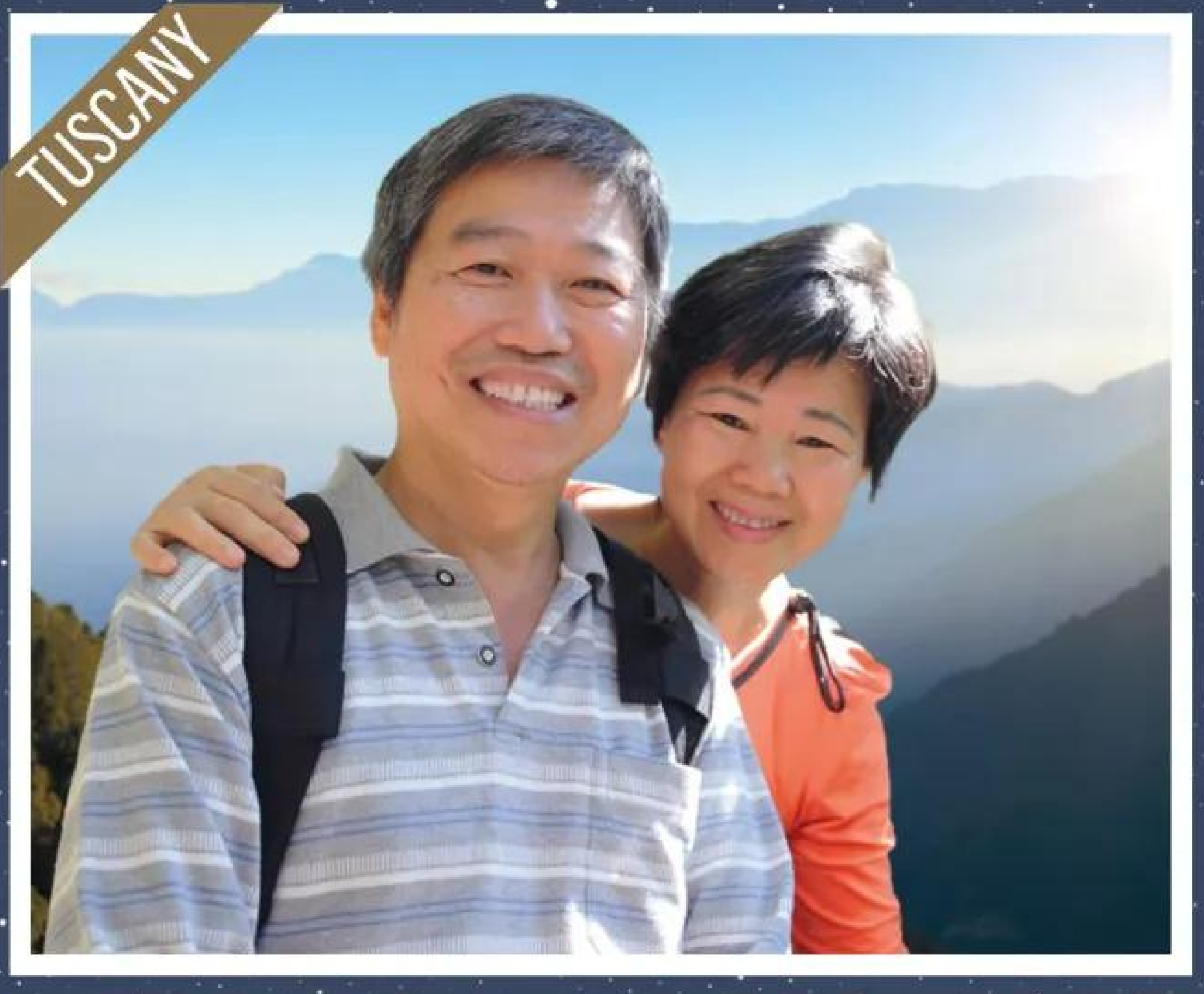

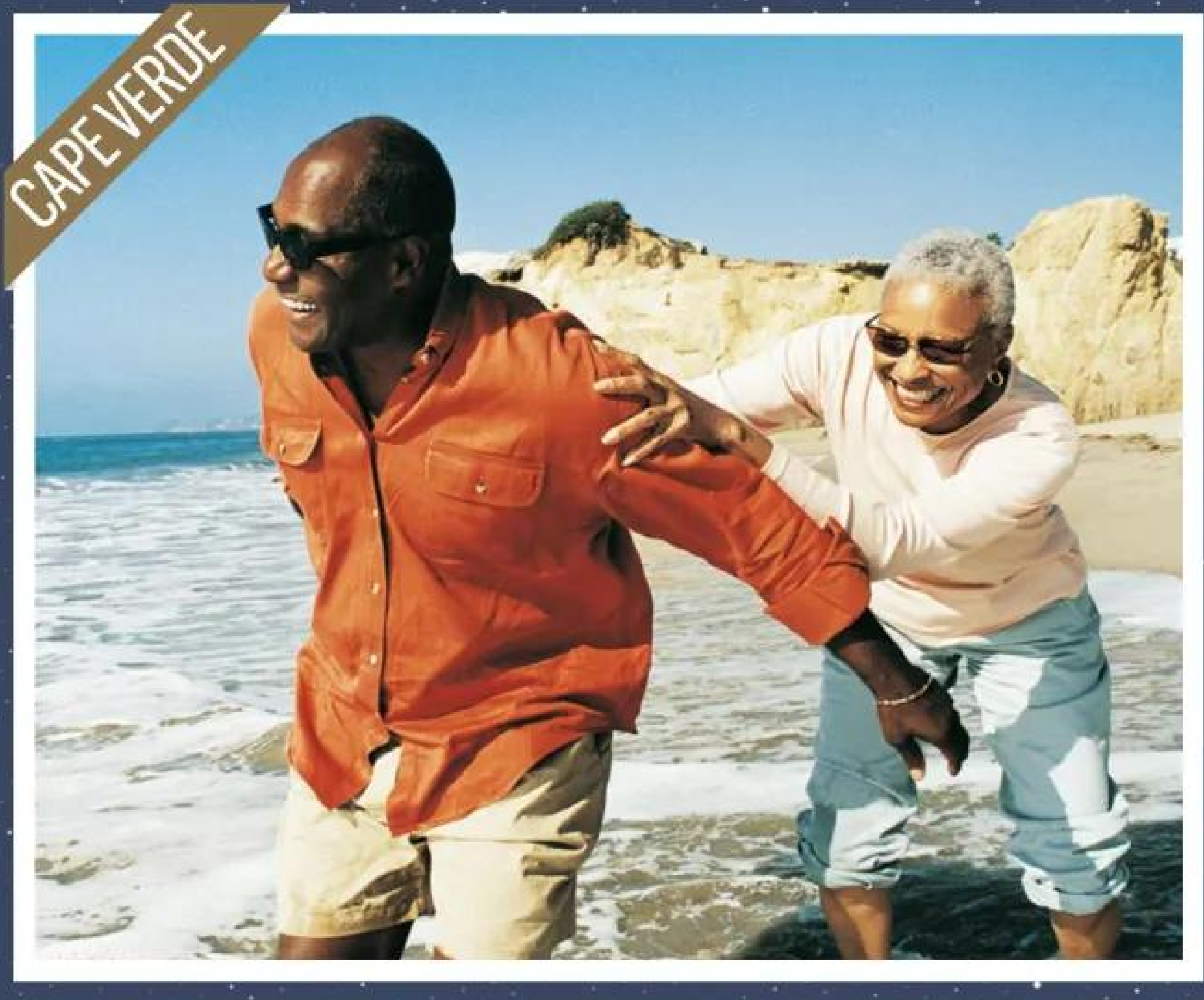

FUTURE
FIFTH EDITION

VISIT…

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WELCOME TO

101 PLACES

FOR THE OVER 50S TO VISIT

You've watched countless documentaries, read more travelogues than you can count, and heard of the amazing adventures your family and friends have had. Now it's time for you to see the world for yourself, and take that trip you've always dreamed of taking.

Perhaps you've idly imagined sipping a cocktail in Venice on a humid summer evening, or wanted to visit Cuba ever since that Che Guevara poster hung on your teenage bedroom wall. Maybe hiking Canada's wilderness has always appealed, or you simply want to escape to some of the world's most relaxing islands.

But with so many wonderful places to go, where should you start? That's where this helpful bookazine comes in. Whether you're looking to plan a long weekend somewhere close by, or go on a trans-continental rail journey, we've got all the information you need to get started on building your epic itinerary.

Covering all of Earth's continents, this carefully curated selection of destinations showcases the very best of each place. Filled with maps, top tips and accessibility information, this guide makes travelling the world seem like a walk in the park. So, what are you waiting for?

DISCLAIMER

The Coronavirus pandemic has had a dramatic impact on global travel. As such, the locations, activities and websites mentioned within may no longer be available or appropriate. Always check the current travel guidelines when planning a trip, and adhere to any local restrictions. With ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises, it's also important to check the latest foreign travel advice for your destination.

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FUTURE

101 PLACES
FOR THE OVER 50s TO VISIT

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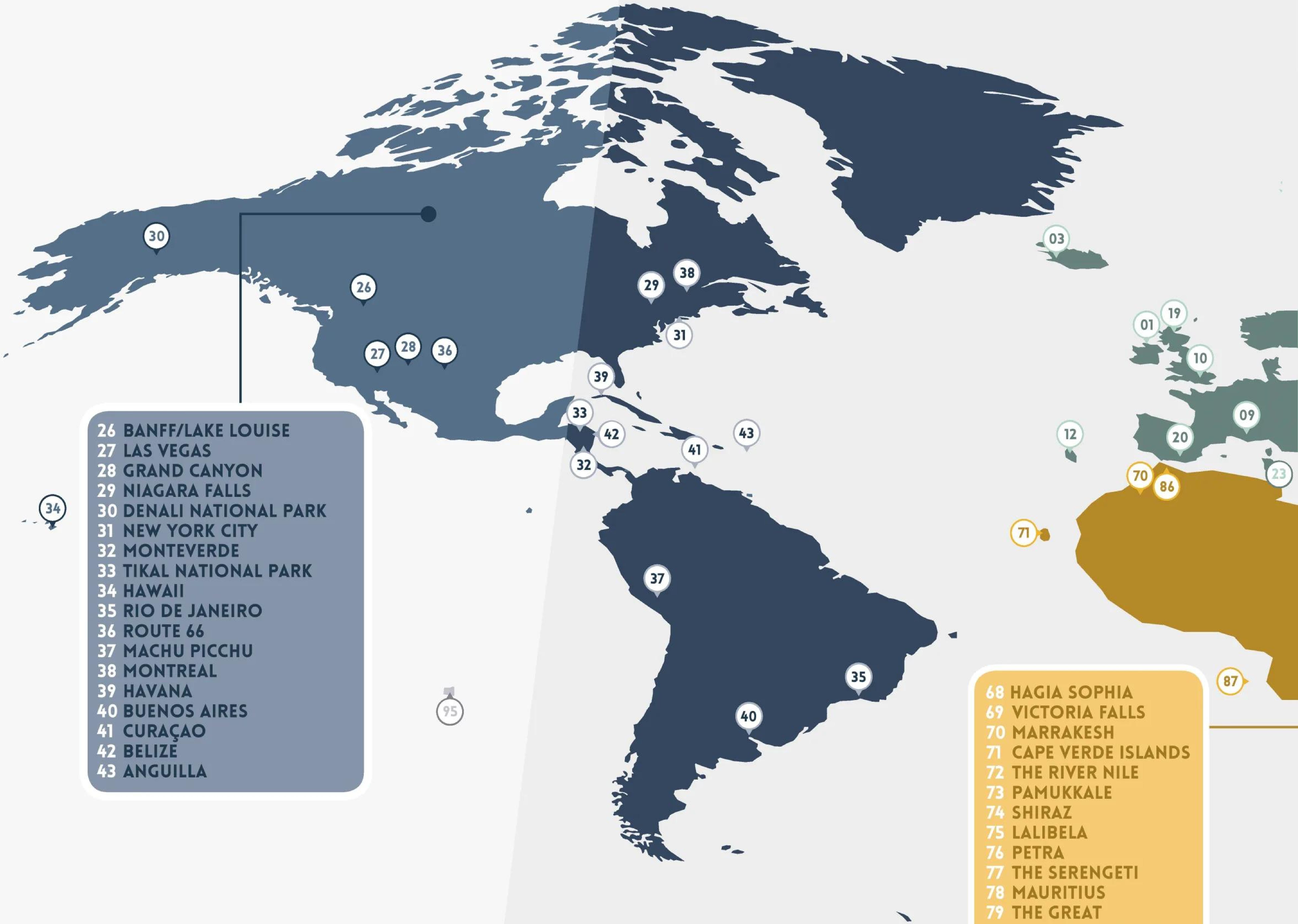
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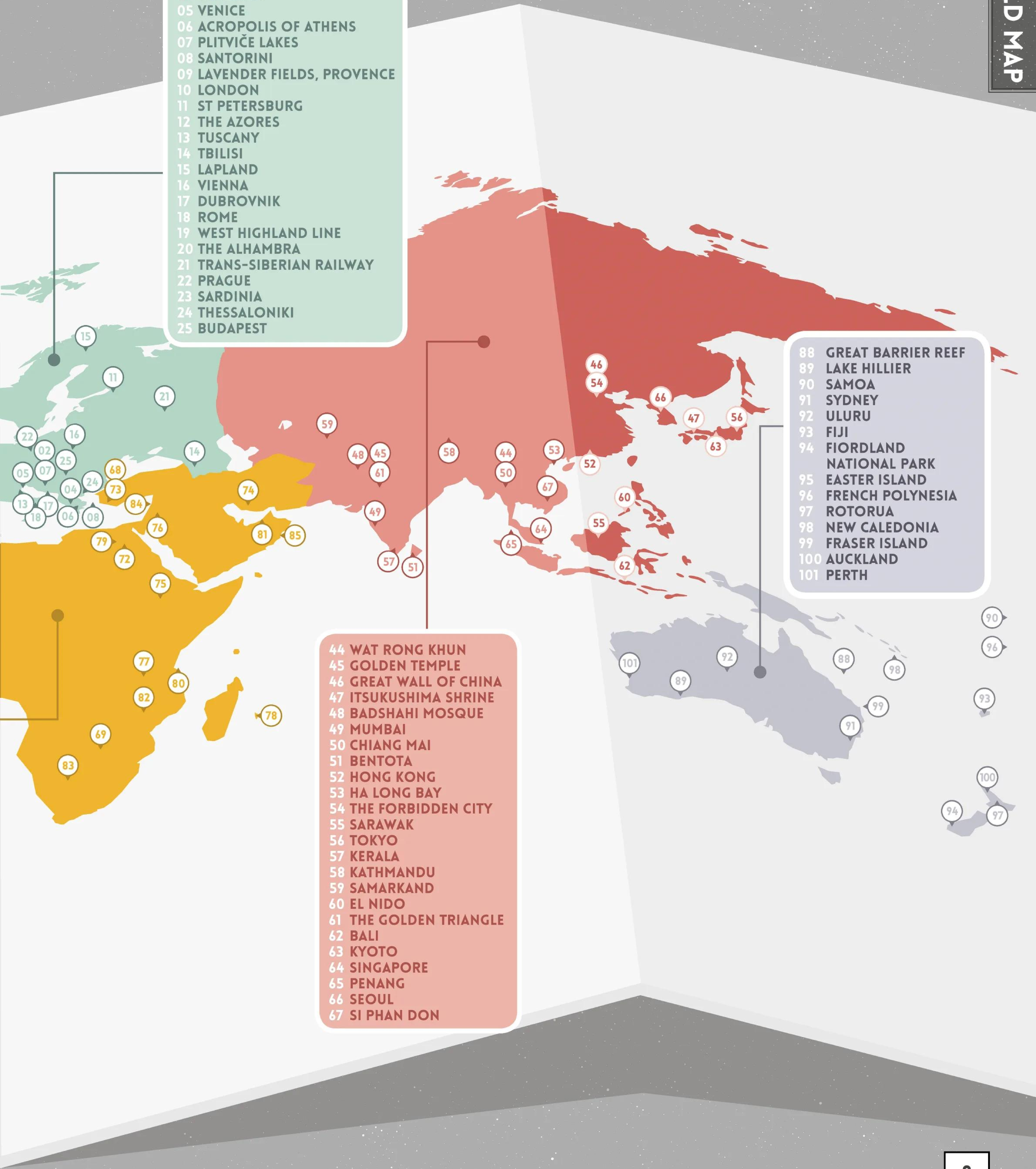
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01 THE GIANT'S CAUSEWAY

Northern Ireland's mystical attraction boasts views across to Scotland

As the sun rises over Northern Ireland, the view from one area of the north coast is nothing short of stunning. With the rays bouncing off the Atlantic Ocean, standing on one of the three outcrops of volcanic rock, frozen in perfect hexagonal columns, it seems as though time itself has stopped. With just the sound of the water lapping at the shore, it's more tranquil than anything you could possibly imagine. It could be the setting of a myth – and, in fact, it is.

Legend has it that the Causeway was created by giant Finn McCool as he threw rocks into the water to cross to Scotland and teach another giant, Benandonner, a lesson. Things didn't exactly go Finn's way, and as he scarpered back to Ireland, he destroyed some of the rocks so that Benandonner couldn't follow him. However, the truth is far less tense – the rocky crops are 60 million-year-old pieces of lava that cooled into more than 40,000 interlocking basalt columns, creating something that's breathtaking and awesome in equal measure. And you can climb all over them, all the way out so you can almost touch the ocean – although this isn't advisable on the rare occasion of very strong winds, as there is no barrier between you and the water!

It's easy to see why the Giant's Causeway became a UNESCO Heritage Site in 1986. Northern Ireland's only attraction to make the list, it holds a lot of geological value, is a totally unique place,, and has been venerated in both science and the arts over the years. There's more to see than just those outcrops, though. Perhaps most famous is the Wishing Chair, a natural throne created by the basalt columns, and there's also Finn McCool's camel. Local folklore claims it was the only steed that could carry the giant; it's also made of lava that is millions of years old.

If walking is more your thing, there are a few paths, like Shepherd's Steps, that take you up the cliff face, past the Organ Pipes and towards an eight-kilometre (five-mile) path that stretches along the picturesque north coast. You can use this route to visit the scenic ruins of Dunseverick Castle to the east, and on a clear day, you can see over the water to Islay, the southernmost island in Scotland's Hebrides chain. The coastline itself is nothing short of stunning – taking a stroll should be high on your list of priorities.

For those who don't want to take lunch with them, there's a pub a short walk away from the visitor centre called The Nook that offers a true taste of Ulster. The visitor centre itself also hosts a cafe, as well as being home to a small exhibition about the Causeway with interactive activities for children. At the Giant's Causeway, there really is something for everyone, and it's all just waiting to be discovered.

The Giant's Causeway stretches out into the Atlantic Ocean

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

It's best to pick a dry day to visit, as the stones become very slippery when wet.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to September

TIME ZONE

UTC

CURRENCY

£ BRITISH POUND

USEFUL SITES

walkni.com/walks/398/giant-s-causeway

nationaltrust.org.uk/giants-causeway

ireland.com/en-gb/amazing-places/giants-causeway

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - From the visitor centre, you can take the step-free Blue Trail, which is less than a mile long – but steep in places. Or, take advantage of the shuttle bus.

Public transport - You'll need to take a bus/coach, rent your own car or hire a taxi to get to the Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre.

FIND OUT MORE

spintheglobe.net/dir/2018/09/09/visit-wheelchair-accessible-giants-causeway/

02 LAKE BLED

Take in the lovely scenery of Lake Bled aboard a boat, with a cream cake

With its beautifully blue waters and picturesque surroundings, Lake Bled is a travel photographer's dream. Its painterly scenery really has to be seen to be believed, though.

The Alpine lake is situated in the Julian Alps in northwest Slovenia and lies next to the town of Bled. The postcard-perfect spot is surrounded by mountains and forests, and the medieval Bled Castle sits above the lake on the north shore, adding to the stunning scenery.

The focal point of this beautiful location is Bled Island, which is situated in the middle of the water. There are a few buildings on the island, but the main one is the pilgrimage church dedicated to the Assumption of Mary. Built in the 17th century, the church has a 52-metre-high (170-feet-high) tower and 99 baroque steps leading up to it from the water's edge. On the island you can listen to the church bell ring and even ring it yourself, which, if legend is correct, will make all of your wishes come true!

If you only have time for one activity when you get to Bled, we'd highly recommend that you visit the island on a traditional Pletna boat. These wooden boats have been taking visitors to the petite, pretty island for centuries and are operated by standing oarsmen. Even if you don't really fancy exploring the island, the journey to and from the island will give you a wonderful, alternative view of the area. Just getting out on the water – especially on a sunny, calm day – is a wonderful experience.

It might not sound like a traditional Slovenian food, but the Bled cream cake (kremšnita) is a culinary must for any visit to the area. Kavarna Belvedere is a café situated in the most stunning location on the edge of the lake. You'll need to hike up quite a few steps to reach it, but once you get there you'll be fruitfully rewarded. Order a generous slice of the cream cake and enjoy it with an utterly breathtaking elevated view of the lake.

If cream cakes and boats aren't really for you, take a relaxing stroll around the tree-lined water's edge or hop in a horse-drawn carriage for a guided tour from one of Bled's coachmen, also known as fijakers!

For an another view of the world-renowned lake, take a trip up to Bled Castle, where you can get a stunning look at the lake, its island and the surrounding peaks. The 12th-century castle boasts impressive architecture as well as a museum collection. You can learn about traditional manual printing in the castle printing works; visit the castle's cellar to bottle wine and seal it with wax; and in the summer you can experience an archery tournament and even meet the castle lord.

The stunning lake is surrounded by imposing mountains

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Dress appropriately as the weather can be changeable here.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Any time of year

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

USEFUL SITES

www.slovenia.info/en
www.bled.si/en
uk.viator.com

CURRENCY
€
EURO

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - There are no stairs along the path around the lake, but the terrain is a little gravelly. Some hills may prove difficult to climb.

Public transport - Once in Lake Bled, tourists can navigate the town without transport. However, there are accessible taxis between the train station and town.

FIND OUT MORE

wheelchairwanderings.com/lake-bled-slovenia

03 GOLDEN CIRCLE

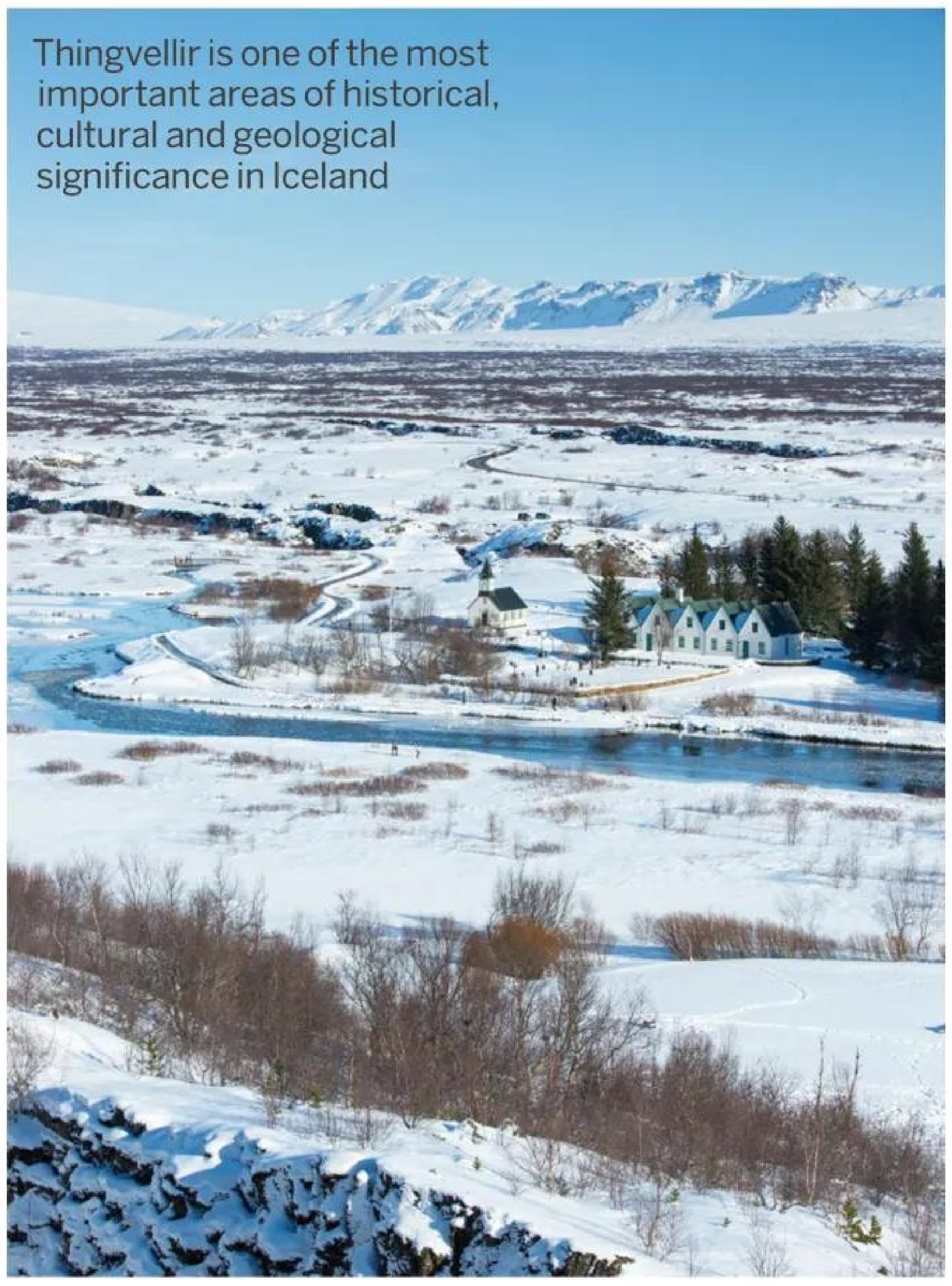
With so much to see and do, don't put Iceland's Golden Circle tour on ice

With so much to offer its visitors, Iceland's Golden Circle will introduce you to the wonders of Reykjavík. If you've never heard of it and are wondering what it is, the answer might surprise you. Iceland's Golden Circle is a sightseeing route to three main attractions of natural beauty in southern Iceland: the heritage-rich Thingvellir National Park, Geysir geothermal area, and the nationally protected Gullfoss waterfall. Instead of driving back and forth, the preferred route is to drive a short circle that's just under 230 kilometres (143 miles). Dozens of Icelandic companies offer tours across the route, which are wildly popular with first-time tourists. It is also possible to drive the route yourself and take in the sights at your own leisure; it really is up to you.

The main areas of the Golden Circle can become crowded, but despite this it is still one of the most memorable routes in the world. Although winter days in Iceland mean drastically shorter daytimes and prolonged darkness, the colder seasons appear to be only slightly less popular than the summer months with tourists, when the sun sets late and rises early. With that in mind, the chance to explore the Golden Circle in the midnight sun makes it the best time to visit to ensure you get the most out of your trip.

The first major stop-gap on the Golden Circle tour is usually the Thingvellir National Park, which sits in the rift valley of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, separating the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates. With many major events in the history of Iceland having taken place at Thingvellir, the park is Iceland's national treasure. Among the sublime landscapes, the national park plays a vital role in Icelandic history as the location of the first open-air parliament in Althing, the location where Viking settlers first decided upon the laws of the Icelandic nation. At the site of what is considered to be the oldest parliament in the world, its first sessions were held around the year 930, around a rock (appropriately named by the settlers 'Law Rock'), which still stands today. A single Icelandic flag planted in the rock by the park's operators marks the exact location for the sake of visitors keen to trek to where Icelandic civilisation began.

Between the winter and summer months, Iceland's rich landscape can change drastically, meaning that be it spring, summer, autumn or winter, the area has something new to show off every season. In summer, charming freshwater streams highlight the park's vibrant khaki-green fields as they wind along the Ridge's rugged terrain. The beautiful Silfra fissure (a crack in the earth that was ripped open by the movement of the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates) borders the Thingvallavatn Lake and offers scuba divers an opportunity to swim between two continents at the same time. When the harsh, cold winter months set in, the park is covered with a blanket of white snow and ice, changing its landscape once again as the tendrils of freshwater freeze and the sub-zero temperatures invade Thingvallavatn Lake, which eventually becomes partially frozen. The park evolves from a thriving spring oasis to a winter wonderland in just a few months.


Thingvellir is one of the most important areas of historical, cultural and geological significance in Iceland

THE NATIONAL PARK PLAYS A VITAL ROLE IN ICELANDIC HISTORY

Gullfoss (Golden Falls) is located in the canyon of the Hvítá River in southwest Iceland, and is a popular part of the Golden Circle route

The famous hot springs of Geyser are also a popular stop along the Golden Circle route, attracting thousands of visitors every year. Located in southwest Iceland, the geothermal area of Haukadalur Valley is home to multiple hot springs and geysers. Strip off and jump into the natural springs and experience the relaxing open-air pools. The Great Geysir, once known for propelling water up to 70 metres (230 feet) high, is rarely active these days. Nevertheless, there are plenty of hot springs and geysers for visitors to sink into, including the powerful and infamous Strokkur, which spurts jets of hot water up to 40 metres (131 feet) high every five to ten minutes. Keep your camera close as you will not want to miss the amazing display of nature.

In terms of size and volume, the Ölfusá River is Iceland's largest by volume, carrying more water to the Atlantic than any other river in the country. Don't believe us? Then visit Gullfoss, or Golden Falls, and watch the rapids of Ölfusá thunder 30 metres (98 feet) down to a valley floor and feel the fresh spray against your skin. In the early 20th century, land owners considered selling the waterfall to foreign investors who intended to harness the energy of the waterfall as a way of generating electricity. Thankfully the plan fell through and the government stepped in, turning it into a

Strokkur, one of Iceland's most famous geysers, beside the Hvítá River, erupts every few minutes in a stunning display of nature

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If hiring a car, make sure you book one in advance, as there's a limited supply.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to August (for more daylight)

TIME ZONE

UTC

CURRENCY
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ICELANDIC KRONA

USEFUL SITES

thingvellir.is/en/
inspiredbyiceland.com
extremeiceland.is/en/destinations/the-golden-circle

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The ground can be slippery, especially the steps down to Gullfoss, but you don't need to stray far from the coach to see the sights.

Public transport - Most Golden Circle tours include a shuttle to take you from your hotel to the tour coach and back again afterwards.

FIND OUT MORE

icelandunlimited.is/tours/accessible-travel/accessible-day-tour-iceland

protected site to ensure that Iceland's beauty wouldn't be harvested by any eager energy tycoons in the future.

As well as the three main attractions of the Golden Circle, there are also multiple other stop-off points that can be explored along the way, such as soaking in the geo-pool that is Reykjadalur's hot river, or the elusive Secret Lagoon natural pool located in the village of Flúðir. If you're looking for something more educational, then a visit to the fascinating (and frankly quite impressive) hydropower museum known as the Nesjavellir Geothermal Power Plant is definitely worth doing. Located a short drive from the Hengill geothermal area and Thingvellir National Park, the power station, which serves the Greater Reykjavík area, produces around 120 megawatts of electrical power and around 1,110 litres of hot water (80 to 85 degrees Celsius / 176 to 185 degrees Fahrenheit) per second, and gives the opportunity to explore an approximately 3,000-year-old explosion crater lake – Kerið volcanic crater. Thanks to a natural change in Iceland's landscape (created as the land moved over a localised hotspot), the area commonly known as Iceland's Western Volcanic Zone includes several crater lakes such as Reykjanes Peninsula and the Langjökull glacier. However, Kerið is the one that has the most visually recognisable caldera still intact.

Iceland's Golden Circle route takes visitors to stunning scenic lookout points such as national parks, waterfalls and geothermal areas like Haukadalur

The Golden Circle trail could be done in a matter of hours, or a day tip. However, with this much natural wonder to see, we recommend you spend a lot longer soaking up the spectacular sights, alien landscapes and truly fascinating history of Iceland.

Iceland offers unrivalled opportunities to see the dancing auroras in action

THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

Once you've finished the Golden Circle route, there's every chance you'll be hooked on Iceland's natural beauty and be craving more. If that's the case then a complementary tour to the Golden Circle is to go in search of the world's most stunning natural light displays: the Northern Lights. While the Golden Circle might be more preferable in the summer, this is one advantage to visiting Iceland in the winter, when the dark nights highlight the aurora borealis – a dazzling result of particles in the air, reacting with one another to give off colourful light patterns. Many travellers will tell you that this is a must-see when you visit Iceland, and they're not wrong. Check out a tour and marvel at the fluorescent greens, purples, oranges and reds as they fill the night sky for what could be a few minutes, but if you're lucky, it could be a few hours.

04 METEORA

Make your own pilgrimage to Greece's spellbinding monasteries of Meteora

Greece is well known for its plethora of monasteries, churches and other religious sites, often built in inaccessible places such as mountaintops and rocky islets out to sea. But none of these sites of worship test their visitors' devotion more than the monasteries of Meteora, a city in the sky, where six working monasteries cling to the edge of rock pillars for dear life.

Religious folk, including monks, nuns and even hermits have inhabited this remote part of Greece since the days of early Christianity, but the threat of invasion forced them to retreat up the mountain. Eventually, their buildings were constructed on teetering rock pillars, or at the edges of sheer cliffs, in order to ensure maximum inaccessibility.

At the height of its popularity, 24 religious sites operated in the Meteora mountains, but today only six remain. All six are open to the public, at the bargain price of just three Euros each. Inside, you can enjoy ancient frescoes that still shimmer in the light, painstakingly painted chapels, well-kept gardens, and even some ingenious technology to help make the monks' lives on the rocks a little easier.

The monasteries are in a beautiful setting, surrounded by dramatic mountains, sheer cliffs, a vast plateau, and woodlands filled with nature. It's a popular spot for hiking, and many take the winding, tree-lined path from the valley floor up to the monasteries, finding it a rewarding experience.

But, if you don't fancy clambering uphill in the searing Greek sunshine, there is a road that takes you to the entrance of all the open monasteries. Once you get there, be prepared to ascend (and descend) hundreds of steps, cross bridges over steep drops, or go through dark and narrow caves to get into the sanctuary of the complex.

Each monastery has different opening hours, and some are closed on certain days, so before you go it's essential to check this information and plan your route accordingly.

Most visitors start with Great Meteoron, the largest and most famous monastery. As well as the standard chapel, garden, museum and courtyard, you can step inside the monastery kitchen, where monks prepared their food and wine. A little deeper into the complex you'll find something far creepier – an ossuary, filled with skulls and bones of monks who once lived and died in Great Meteoron.

A little way downhill is Varlaam Monastery, with its beautiful architecture and stunning viewpoints, including a shaded pavilion that looks over the edge of the mountain.

Then, if you're a film buff, it's certainly worth the difficult trek to Agia Triada, which was used as the villain's headquarters in the Bond film For Your Eyes Only.

If you go to Meteora, you're guaranteed a great view, whichever monastery you're exploring

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Men and women must cover everything, except their heads and forearms.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Late spring to early autumn

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY

€

EURO

USEFUL SITES

visitmeteora.travel/

meteora-greece.com/

discovergreece.com/en/mainland/thessaly-sporades/meteora

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The Monastery of the Holy Trinity and Great Meteoron have over 300 steps, so are less accessible. Rousanou, Varlaam and Saint Nikolaos have an average of 140 steps.

Public transport - Meteora is accessible from Athens and Thessaloniki, by train or bus, via the town of Kalabaka. The bus company serving Meteora is KTEL Trikalon.

FIND OUT MORE

visitmeteora.travel/faq

Next, you can visit the two convents for women, Rousanou and Agios Stefanos – the latter of which is the most accessible, and has been recently restored to its former glory. End your day at the bottom of the valley with Nikolaos Anapafsas, one of the hardest to reach. From its courtyard you can see the eerie remains of abandoned monasteries precariously perched on surrounding rocks. The monks here are welcoming to curious foreign visitors.

At the end of your long day, you'll want to sit down, and there's no better way to relax than watching the sun go down over the monasteries. There are a number of viewpoints you can catch this spectacular sundown – though be careful not to fall off the edge.

The historic method of travel, gondolas, are still in use

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The city is busy in late spring and early summer, so try to avoid these months.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

All year round (the city is less busy in winter, but it is cooler)

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

USEFUL SITES

veneziaunica.it/en
lonelyplanet.com/italy/venice
veneziaautentica.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Venice is famous for its bridges, but many neighbourhoods can be visited without steps. Around half of Venice can be accessed by wheelchair.

Public transport - Public trains running to the main island are accessible with assistance. Vaporettos (water buses) are somewhat accessible.

FIND OUT MORE

sagetraveling.com/Venice-Disabled-Access

05 VENICE

Explore Italy's City of Water and its vibrant history

The city of Venice isn't just steeped in history – its past flows through its famous canals and can be seen in every crevice of the city's magnificent architecture. If you're looking for a cultural trip with a Renaissance vibe, you needn't look any further. But don't be fooled into forcing Venice into this corner because it has so much more to offer you.

In the 18th century, Venice was a party city and in some ways it still is – especially if you visit in the run-up to Lent. At that time of year, Venice really lets its hair down and goes all out in Carnevale. An already-vibrant Venice comes alive as the streets are filled with people in elaborate costumes and masks in an open-air festival that spans the entire city. You'll find live music in the squares, balls and parties to attend, and an endless list of sights to see.

For those looking for something a little quieter, it's important to remember that Venice is an incredibly busy tourist city thanks to its stunning buildings and lively history, but as long as Carnevale isn't on, you should be okay. When the streets aren't full of mask-wearing revellers, you'll find it a lot easier to check out the other attractions Venice offers you.

It's the gondolas that are most associated with the city. You'd regret it if you went all that way and missed out on the experience of riding through Venice's canals via the traditional method. You can book tours of the city from the water or simply go for a ride, but it's best to stay away from the Grand Canal as it can get incredibly busy. It is a must-do experience, as there is no other way to appreciate how to get around in the Floating City. For a cheaper alternative, try the traghetti (public gondolas) that cross the Grand Canal.

For some good Gothic architecture, the Doge's Palace is where you'll want to head next. Built in 1424, it was one of the city's most important buildings, and it reopened as a museum in 1923. During the Venetian Republic, this was where the ruler would live, spending their days in opulent apartments and stunning halls. The palace also has chambers from when the city was administrated from there, and a prison, connected by the famous Bridge of Sighs. For more splendour, check out Saint Mark's Basilica near the Doge's Palace. While the outside is simply stunning, inside really is something to behold. Over 8,000 square metres (86,000 square feet) of mosaics cover the walls, vaults and copulas, telling different stories from the Bible with glittering gold backgrounds.

But Venice has more than history. A little-known fact is that Venice is the capital of the Veneto region: the home of Prosecco. With tiny wine bars all through the city, it's impossible to go for a drink and not see it on the menu. It's the perfect excuse to try the different flavours as you sit overlooking the gorgeous canals on a warm summer day.

The best views of the Acropolis can be found in rooftop bars and restaurants in the Thissio, Monastiraki or Plaka neighbourhoods

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Buy the combination ticket so you can see other ancient sites, too.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to late September (to avoid potential rain)

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

CURRENCY
€
EURO

USEFUL SITES

visitgreece.gr/en/culture/archaeological_sites/the_acropolis

theacropolismuseum.gr/en

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Visiting does require some pre-planning for those with mobility issues. A stair-climber (hirolift) and elevator are available, but phone the day before to check the facilities are operating.

Public transport - Two metro stations are located nearby, but a cobblestoned section leads up to the ticket office. Wheelchair-users are recommended to take a taxi to avoid this.

FIND OUT MORE

accessibletourism.org/?i=enat.en.accessible-cities.1903

06 ACROPOLIS OF ATHENS

Greece's modern city of Athens still beats around its ancient heart

It was the place where Athenians came to worship their city's goddess, Athena. It was also a thriving hub for trade, the military, and even democracy. The Acropolis of Athens is so much more than the breathtaking Parthenon, but it's a good place to start. Built in the 5th century BCE, the Parthenon temple once contained a gigantic statue of Athena herself, where worshippers would come to lay gifts and sacrifices at her feet. The temple has decayed significantly since then, and it has been hit by a few Ottoman and Venetian cannonballs along the way, but what remains is as stunning now as it was back then.

To get to this world-famous landmark, take the metro to Akropoli station. Inside the station, there are replicas of the Parthenon Marbles, and even some archaeological finds to admire. Get out and walk towards the southern entrance to the Acropolis, as opposed to the main entrance, as the queues are considerably shorter there. It's also the best place to start – on your way up to the top of the hill, you'll pass by extensive remains of ancient Athens, where people really lived, worked, and worshipped. On the way, there's the Theatre of Dionysus, a stoa, and the awesome Odeon of Herodes Atticus, which is still in use as an arts venue.

When you have ascended the steps and passed under the imposing propylaea, you'll be greeted with a view of the iconic Parthenon – the moment you've been waiting for. But before you head straight over there, it's worth having a peek at the Athena Nike temple, which is remarkably well preserved for its age. Explore the edges of the great Parthenon and marvel at the ancient genius who built it, and listen to the wind rushing through the pillars.

Take a moment to turn away from the ancient stuff, and look into the modern-day city. The Acropolis is one of the highest points for miles around, so you should be able to see as far as the port of Piraeus, nearly ten kilometres (six miles) away. You can also spot the Greek Parliament, the Temple of Olympian Zeus and more ancient monuments close by. Notice how all the city's main streets lead towards you – despite being 2,500 years old, this monument is still at the centre of Athenian life.

Before you descend the hill to return to the modern, be sure to admire the Erechtheion, which features intricate and impressive pillars of Greek women. One of these was taken by Lord Elgin to decorate his home in Scotland, and it can now be seen in the British Museum.

To make the most of your Acropolis experience, the new Acropolis Museum, which was opened in 2009, is a must. Built to house every single artefact found on the hill and surrounding area, you'll find many archaeological wonders, such as colourful statues and pottery. Modern technology helps you to imagine what the Acropolis was once like in its heyday. However, the museum remains at the centre of a controversy concerning the return of the Parthenon (or Elgin) Marbles from Britain to Greece, with the Greek government hoping this modern venue will be a suitable home for their lost treasures.

Wooden walkways stretch across the lakes so you can get closer to the cascading clear waters

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Swimming and cycling are not permitted in the national park.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to June (to avoid the busy summer season)

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY
Kn
CROATIAN KUNA

USEFUL SITES

www.visit-croatia.co.uk
www.np-plitvicka-jezera.hr/en
whc.unesco.org/en/list/98

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Tickets include shuttle buses between the upper and lower lakes, a boat ride around Kozjak Lake and a panoramic train journey.

Public transport - The lakes can easily be reached by direct bus lines from Zagreb, Karlovac, Zadar or Split. An electric boat links the four lower and 12 upper lakes.

FIND OUT MORE

getbybus.com/en/blog/plitvice-lakes

07 PLITVIČE LAKES

Explore the ever-changing waterfall paradise of Croatia

Why visit just one lake when you can see 16, all interconnected by spectacular waterfalls? As you wander across the wooden walkways that stretch across Croatia's Plitvice Lakes, you'll be surrounded by brilliant blue-green water that has been shaping the landscape for millennia. The lakes are actually part of one long river flowing between the Mala Kapela and Plješivica mountains, but over time it has been divided up thanks to a natural phenomenon known as a karst landscape.

The minerals in the river basin that give the lakes their distinctive colour also react with organisms in the water to slowly wash up new layers of rock that act as natural dams. Some of these began forming over 200 million years ago, but thanks to the cascading water have been constantly eroded and reformed to create an ever-changing system of waterfalls and lakes.

It was this incredible geology that saw the Plitvice Lakes granted UNESCO World Heritage status in 1979, and they are still Croatia's most popular tourist attraction. It's not only these breathtaking water features that visitors can enjoy, though, as the lakes actually only take up around one per cent of the entire Plitvice Lakes National Park – 300 square kilometres (116 square miles) of luscious forest that is home to many endangered species of wildlife.

The park is open all year round, and is well worth visiting no matter what the season. In summer you can marvel at the luscious greenery, in autumn enjoy the rich red and golden hues, and in winter see the waterfalls turn into beautiful ice sculptures as the landscape becomes a snowy wonderland.

With so much to see, it will take around eight hours to explore all of the lakes on foot. Therefore you may want to prolong your visit by staying in one of the hotels next to the park, or pitching up in its campsite. This will allow you to explore at your own pace, and ensure you don't miss the chance to stand beneath the park's largest waterfall, the 78-metre-tall (256-feet-tall) Veliki Slap, and walk among the amazing rock formations of the beautiful Šupljara cave.

There are seven different routes of varying lengths that you can take around the lakes, as well as a few hiking trails that will take you deep into the surrounding forests and meadows. However, if you're not feeling too energetic, you can make use of the free electric-boat ride across the serene Lake Kozjak, the park's largest lake, enabling you to get a closer look at the wildlife swimming in the clear waters. You can also hop on the free shuttle bus that can take you up to the highest points of the park for some truly breathtaking panoramic views.

Once you've seen the roaring waterfalls and peaceful lakes, there are plenty of restaurants and cafés where you can stop off to enjoy some delicious food and reflect on the majesty of this old and new natural wonder.

Sunset in the village of Oia provides that legendary Santorini snapshot you've been waiting for

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

There are a lot of uphill donkey rides available in Fira – be sure to choose more ethical companies.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April, May or September (to avoid the worst crowds)

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY
€
EURO

USEFUL SITES

santorini.net
visitgreece.gr/en/greek_islands/santorini
santorinisecrets.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Stairs or steep hills form the primary access to Mountaintop Santorini. The cable car is accessible, but terrain is rocky at the top.

Public transport - Whilst there are buses, taxis are the recommended mode of travel. Cabbies will also know the best places for accessible views.

FIND OUT MORE

disabledtravelersguide.com/travel/travel_disabled_greek_islands.htm

08 SANTORINI

Capture your own postcard moment on Greece's most iconic island

With its dazzling whitewashed buildings, trademark blue-domed churches, and dramatic clifftop towns, Santorini is arguably Greece's most recognisable location. This little island in the Aegean Sea offers so much beauty in such a small space, and visitors flock here in their millions to watch the sun set over its red, rocky landscape.

But this haven of tranquillity was not always so; the island had explosive beginnings. Its unique shape – it resembles a reverse 'C', pulling some smaller islands into its embrace – was caused by an extremely violent volcanic eruption thousands of years ago. What's left is the remains of a volcano caldera that flooded with seawater. The people of Santorini soon built a new civilisation, perilously clinging to the sides of the old rim.

As you might expect from anywhere in Greece, Santorini (also known as Thira) is packed with archaeological treasures, including an entire village called Akrotiri, which overlooks much of the island. There, you'll see the foundations of a grand temple, and colourful frescoes that have miraculously withstood the test of time.

When you want to return to the present, you can meander about Santorini's more modern towns and villages, which seem to climb up the old volcano like a stairway into Greece's perfect blue skies. Browse the charming little shops of Oia, or take a leisurely cable car ride from the port to the main town of Fira. While you're in town, don't forget to feast your eyes on elaborate Byzantine churches, which feature gilded chandeliers and painstakingly painted murals of Christian imagery.

In Fira, the largest settlement on the island, you can enjoy a panoramic view of the entire caldera, or check out some of the local history museums. If you'd prefer a more typical Santorini view, head ten kilometres (6.2 miles) north to visit Oia, the village where that distinctive Santorini photo is set. You know the one: the colourful village overlooking a rocky seaside, which the Greek tourist board adores.

If you're looking for more active pursuits, Santorini has much to offer. Hike up to Skaros Rock, a precarious outcrop that was once home to a medieval fort. Or trek all the way down to Red Beach – an almost alien setting where the red, sandy cliffs of Santorini meet the turquoise waters of the Aegean Sea.

At the end of your day exploring all of the island's delights, you'll be in need of some well-earned rest and relaxation. Get yourself to a seaside taverna – Amoudi Bay is a particularly scenic spot – and sip on a glass of Santorini's famous red wine, which is said by some to be the best in all of Greece. While you're at it, order some domatokeftedes – a Santorini speciality of deep-fried local tomatoes (famed for their deliciously sweet taste) and classic Greek feta cheese. For afters, you won't want to miss loukoumades - sticky, sweet Greek doughnuts that come in a variety of flavours.

Santorini offers some of the most luxurious hotels in the world, so if you're staying in one, you're in for a treat. Relax in infinity pools that stretch seamlessly out over the water, giving you a stunning view of the volcanic landscape. If you're in more modest accommodation, you can still enjoy the wonderfully Greek 'philoxenia' (love to strangers/guests) that your hosts will undoubtedly offer – after all, you are in Greece's most sought-after destination.

The lavender plants make for gorgeous purple horizons

09 LAVENDER FIELDS, PROVENCE

Lose yourself in rows of lavender as you wander France's blooming fields

The lavender fields of Provence make for a marvellous experience: as you stand in the expansive seas of purple, the soft, subtle and definitive smell of relaxation hits you like a cloud of sweet dreams. Like the cherry blossom season in Japan, the bloom of the lavender fields in France has a small window of opportunity in which it can be enjoyed annually, but it's worth the rush.

Lavender typically begins to bloom around the time of the summer solstice, in the final weeks of June, and it is harvested by the end of July or mid-August at the very latest. However, blooming depends on the variety, elevation and climate variations. Veteran visitors will recommend that for a quieter experience of the fields, you should visit before mid-July, but if you're not too fussy about crowds then by all means dive right in at the height of summer for a bloomin' lovely experience.

If you want to score yourself some quality lavender on your trip then head to the lavender capital of Sault. This southeastern village is the go-to spot for lavender enthusiasts, as winding roads weave through the lavender fields. On 15 August every year, a major festival is held celebrating the lavender plant, so to really get in the spirit, be sure to visit then. Another option is to head north from Sault to Montbrun-les-Bains, following the roads until you reach Barret-de-Lioure before coming back down to the tiny village of Ferrassières.

Outside of Sault, stick to the Luberon region – areas such as Gordes, Roussillon or Bonnieux – as well as the higher altitude lavender regions and the west and south areas of the Mediterranean – the Alpilles and Avignon. Avignon, Marseille and Monaco are popular base-points to depart from on guided tours to the local lavender fields. To totally immerse yourself in the experience, book a tour with the artisan growers who have been running family farms for generations, visit a distillery to learn about the harvesting process, or stop off at the Lavender Museum in Coustellet to learn more about the traditions of lavender farming in Provence so that you can walk away with insider information about the heritage of these farms to tell your friends.

The Medieval Abbaye de Sénanque, a Cistercian abbey near the village of Gordes in the Vaucluse, is a beautiful monument to visit where French monks grow lavender. However, parking is particularly limited so avoid peak times and either go first thing in the morning (before 9am) or in the evening (after 7pm) when large group tours are elsewhere.

You will also find fields of lavender perfection in the fertile hills of the Valensole Plateau. Down in Valensole village, you can browse the market stalls selling perfume and essential oils. Enjoy the scent of lavender in the air as you explore the cobbled streets here, and in the nearby Aix-en-Provence there are more stalls selling perfumes and essential oils to fill your suitcase with lavender goodies before you head home.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Parking in Provence is limited.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Late June to early August

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

USEFUL SITES

provenceguide.co.uk
theluberon.com
routes-lavande.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Although the Lavender Fields are situated on plateaus, terrain can be natural and uneven. Museums and local towns, meanwhile, have more accessible venues.

Public transport - This area of France is best accessed by car. Avignon train station is the nearest, but you'll need to take taxis from here.

FIND OUT MORE

provenceguide.co.uk/pratical-information/access-and-transport-104-1.html

The Elizabeth Tower is often called Big Ben, but this is in fact the name of the bell

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

You can buy or top up an Oyster travel card or use a contactless bank card.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May (for the flowers) or June to July (for royal palace openings)

TIME ZONE

UTC

CURRENCY

£ GREAT BRITISH POUND

USEFUL SITES

tfl.gov.uk
londonpass.com
hrp.org.uk

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Most major monuments are on level terrain, while museums and galleries have elevators or escalators.

Public transport - Currently 78 (of 270) Tube stations are fully step-free; download TfL's bespoke guides to plot your best route. Alternatively, the bus and river-boat networks are extensive.

FIND OUT MORE

visitlondon.com/traveller-information/essential-information/accessible-london

10 LONDON

From red phone boxes to black cabs, there's an iconic sight on every corner

Samuel Johnson once said: "When a man is tired of London, he's tired of life." London is one of the most vibrant cities in the world. It's packed with things to see and do, from beautiful architecture and history to iconic landmarks and, of course, the Royal Family! It's a shopaholic's paradise, a culture vulture's dream and a major foodie hotspot. But beyond this, every neighbourhood has something unique to offer.

Red telephone booths, double-decker buses and the Underground are synonymous with London, but the city is full of iconic sights. One of the most famous landmarks is Big Ben. You can't take a trip to London without taking a photograph in front of the Houses of Parliament. Mistakenly, most people think Big Ben is the 96-metre (315-foot) clock tower, but it is in fact the massive 13-ton (13,760-kilogram) bell – the tower itself is called the Elizabeth Tower, to mark the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012. Before then, it was simply known as the Clock Tower. It's a spectacular sight to see, particularly when lit up at night. Tower Bridge is another landmark that often appears on postcards. One of the city's most famous bridges, its high-level walkways not only offer incredible views of the city, but a different perspective of the River Thames through its glass floor.

There are countless places for epic views, but arguably some of the best vistas can be seen from the London Eye, Europe's largest observation wheel. There is also The View from The Shard; London's tallest building offers the highest viewpoint at 244 metres (800 feet).

If history is what you're after, the Tower of London is the place to visit. This royal palace, fortress and infamous prison encompasses more than 1,000 years of history. Visitors can meet the iconic 'Beefeaters', hear tales of torture and execution, and visit the Crown Jewels at this UNESCO World Heritage Site.

London has three other World Heritage Sites: the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey, Maritime Greenwich, and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. The Palace of Westminster is not only a stunning piece of Victorian Gothic architecture, but it's also home to the Houses of Parliament. Next door, Westminster Abbey is Britain's coronation church and the venue for Prince William and Catherine's wedding.

London has some unique neighbourhoods from affluent Mayfair to bohemian Camden, but the leafy area of Greenwich has some of the best highlights, including the Royal Observatory, National Maritime Museum, Cutty Sark and Greenwich Market. Here you can visit the home of Greenwich Mean Time, see the uniform that Nelson was wearing when he was killed at the Battle of Trafalgar, discover the world's largest surviving tea clipper, or sample delicious food.

While 30 minutes from the city centre, Kew Gardens highlights its greener side. The world's most diverse collection of living plants is housed here. Hyde Park, Hampstead Heath, Richmond Park, The Regent's Park and St James's Park are just a few of the other vast green spaces that draw attention to London's natural beauty.

While spring is one of the best times to visit to see London in bloom, if you want a regal day out, you'll have to come in the summer when Buckingham Palace, the Queen's official London residence, opens to the public. From the Changing of the Guard – a formal ceremony of the Queen's guards in their red uniforms and bearskin hats – to the 19 lavish stately rooms inside, the palace never fails to impress. Other awe-inspiring palaces include Kensington, the birthplace of Queen Victoria; and Hampton Court, Henry VIII's favourite royal residence. If you still haven't had your fix, visit St Paul's Cathedral to see where Prince Charles and Diana were married. Climb the 528 steps to the Golden Gallery for spectacular views, or listen to the acoustics in the Whispering Gallery.

If you want to tour Buckingham Palace, you'll need to visit between the end of July and September

YOU COULD VISIT A DOZEN TIMES AND NEVER RUN OUT OF THINGS TO DISCOVER

Designed by Britain's most famous architect, Sir Christopher Wren, St Paul's is not the only masterpiece. Christ Church at Spitalfields, the Old Painted Hall at the Old Royal Naval College and the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel are all visually astonishing and worth a trip.

London has a plethora of beautiful sights to see, but it's also bursting with things to do. The city is packed with museums and galleries, many of which are free to visit. From the Rosetta Stone at the British Museum to Vincent van Gogh's Sunflowers at The National Galley, it's a treasure trove. Other cultural gems include Tate Modern and Tate Britain, the National Portrait Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Natural History Museum.

Music fans are just as spoilt for choice. Visit the shooting locations for some of the most famous album covers, including the Beatles' Abbey Road, or go to top-notch record stores and music venues. Among the best venues are the Royal Albert Hall, Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club, The Roundhouse in Camden and the 02, which hosts some of the biggest names in music.

But it's not just music and art. London has every form of entertainment from theatre in the West End or at Shakespeare's Globe, to nightclubs, pubs and bars. Have a pint at The George Inn near London Bridge, where Shakespeare once drank, or sip a James Bond martini at DUKES Bar.

Dozens of new bars and restaurants open every month, making the city a holy grail for foodies. From street food to fine dining, there's something for everyone. Visit Brick Lane for a Bengali-British curry, wander Borough Market for gourmet grub, or take your pick from one of almost 70 Michelin-starred restaurants. If you want the quintessential British experience, have a full English breakfast at a local café (or greasy spoon, as the Londoners call them), enjoy afternoon tea at The Ritz, or eat fish and chips at Poppies.

London is also a fashion capital. From high-end boutiques in Mayfair to flagship stores on Oxford Street, you can shop until you drop. If you're after more than just clothes, Harrods and Fortnum & Mason are almost attractions in their own right, and London's markets, especially Portobello Road, are the perfect place to hunt for antiques and one-of-a-kind items.

London has something for everyone. Kids can get a thrill riding the ArcelorMittal Orbit, the world's longest tunnel slide, and sports fans can visit Lord's, Wembley or Wimbledon.

It's such a multicultural city that you can dine on Chinese food in Chinatown, watch French films at the Barbican, and learn Flamenco at the Southbank Centre all in one day. There are so many events from the Notting Hill Carnival to Chinese New Year. There's always something different to do. Ride a narrowboat on Regent's Canal, watch street performers in Covent Garden or visit Sherlock Holmes' Baker Street.

One of the best things about London is that it's ever-changing. You could visit a dozen times and never run out of new things to discover. You may get tired running around trying to do it all, but like Samuel Johnson, you'll never get tired of London.

ESTD 1887
PORTOBELLO ROAD W.11

Hunt for an antique at Portobello Market, just one of London's incredible markets

FAIRY-TALE VISIT

You can see palaces in London, but if you're making the journey to the UK, you might as well make a trip to one of the best known of them all. Take a day trip to see the world's oldest castle and the venue for two recent royal weddings. Walk in the footsteps of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle or Princess Eugenie and Jack Brooksbank who were both married here.

Windsor Castle is the largest occupied castle, covering 13 acres (five hectares). It is currently one of the Queen's residences, and she spends most of her private weekends here. The castle has more than 900 years of history and has been home to 39 monarchs.

Take an audio tour narrated by Prince Charles to visit the opulent state rooms and marvel at the Gothic architecture of St George's Chapel. When else will you get to wander a castle? It's a one-hour train journey from London, but very much worth it for a magical day out.

Visit Windsor Castle, where Prince Harry and Meghan held their fairy-tale wedding

St Paul's Cathedral was designed by famous British architect Sir Christopher Wren

11 COPENHAGEN

The city mixes modern architecture and thinking while celebrating its history

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Download the Copenhagen Card app and pay for access to over 80 attractions & unlimited public transport

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Early spring to avoid the crowds

TIME ZONE

UTC +2

CURRENCY
kr.
KRONER

USEFUL SITES

visitcopenhagen.com
visitdenmark.com/denmark
https://www.copenhagen.com/

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Copenhagen is very accessible via walking as there are no steep hills. Most tourist destinations are easy to walk to and have amenities to help if needed.

Public transport - All Metro stations have disability access. If you're arriving from Copenhagen Airport then you may need assistance getting on or off the trains.

FIND OUT MORE

www.visitcopenhagen.com

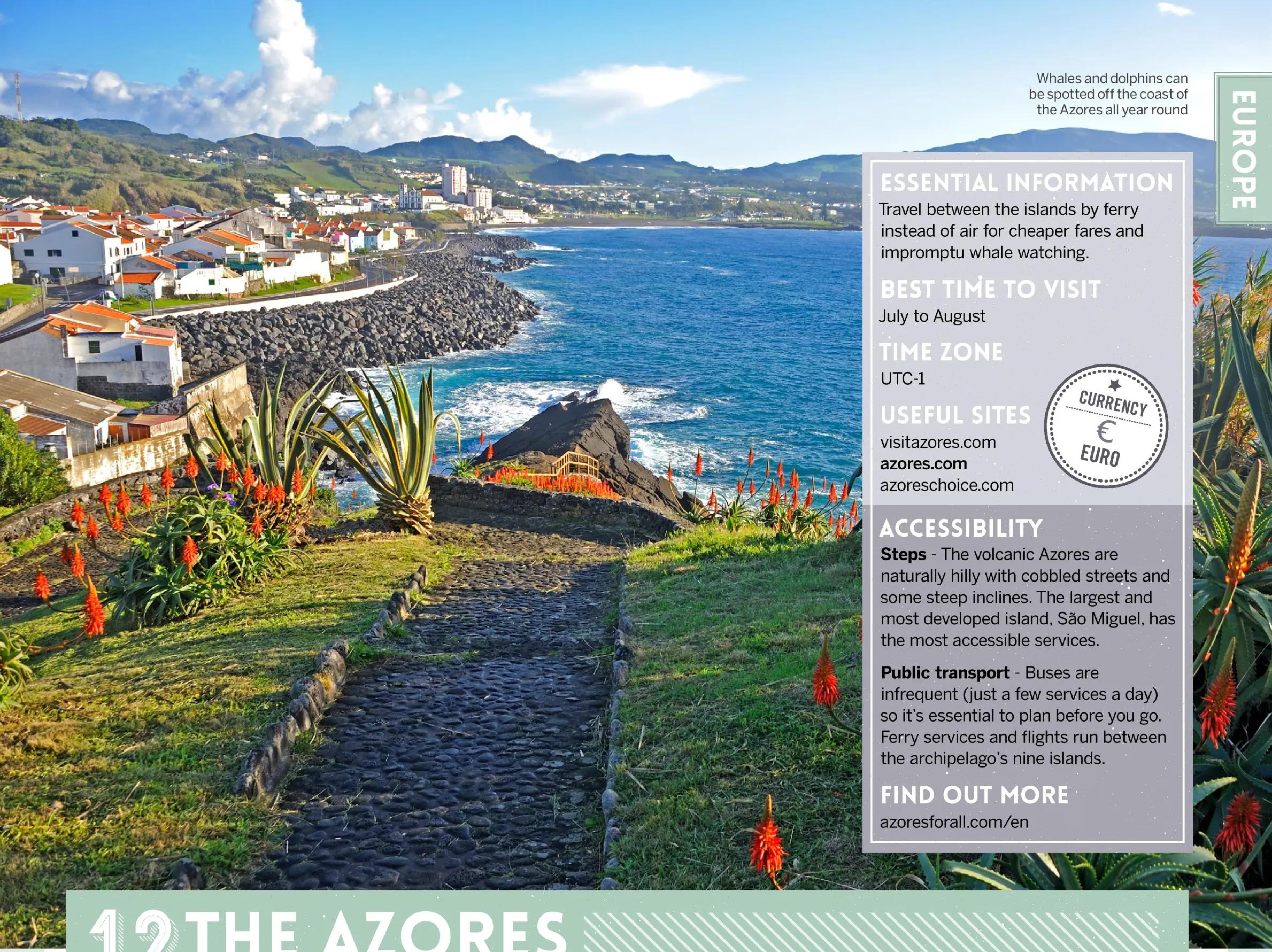
The Capital of Denmark was originally a simple fishing village when it was founded in the 10th century, but it eventually flourished to become the capital city in the 15th century. Today, Copenhagen is one of the must-see destinations in Europe and it is almost notorious for being one of the most easygoing and livable cities in the world.

No trip to the city of Copenhagen is complete without visiting the Little Mermaid. Found at the Langelinie promenade, this bronze statue depicts the fairy tale of the same name by famous Danish author Hans Christian Anderson and is one of the most visited attractions in the city. From here, you are just a short walk or cycle away from Amalienborg Palace, the official residence of the Danish royal family. Here, you can watch the changing of the guards, visit the Amalienborg museum or look through gardens and Gala Hall, which are still in use today, to get a taste of the Danish royal life. While on the subject, not too far away from this spot is Rosenborg Castle; the summerhouse of King Christian IV built in 1606 and is today the home of the Danish crown jewels.

Being in the middle of the city, you won't be too far from somewhere to get a decent meal and Copenhagen has something for all tastes and budgets. A traditional Danish lunch for you to try is smørrebrød; open-faced sandwiches with a variety of toppings, but if you want something smaller to have while on the go, then you can treat yourself to a delicious Danish pastry or a hot dog from one of the many vendors dotted around the city centre.

You could easily spend a whole day in Copenhagen just going from museum to museum. No matter your taste in art, you are bound to find something that catches your eye. The Glyptoteket, an art and sculpture museum located in the heart of the city, not only displays Danish and French sculptures but it also houses Roman, Egyptian and Greek items. If you are interested in Danish history, then you must pay a visit to then Nationalmuseet, also known as the National Museum or the National Gallery. Other museums for you to explore in the city include the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, the Design Museum and Thorvaldsens Museum to name a few.

For those of you who enjoy a good pint of beer, you should know that Copenhagen is home to Carlsberg, the iconic Danish brewer. You can take a historical tour around the original brewery, which first opened in 1847, and find out about the history of the brewing. You can even indulge in the beer tasting experience! If craft beer is more to your taste, you'll be spoilt for choice. In May, the city hosts a Beer Week where hundreds of breweries come together to celebrate the Danish beer scene with plenty of tasting and events on.



Whales and dolphins can be spotted off the coast of the Azores all year round

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Travel between the islands by ferry instead of air for cheaper fares and impromptu whale watching.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July to August

TIME ZONE

UTC-1

USEFUL SITES

visitazores.com
azores.com
azoreschoice.com

CURRENCY
€
EURO

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The volcanic Azores are naturally hilly with cobbled streets and some steep inclines. The largest and most developed island, São Miguel, has the most accessible services.

Public transport - Buses are infrequent (just a few services a day) so it's essential to plan before you go. Ferry services and flights run between the archipelago's nine islands.

FIND OUT MORE

azoresforall.com/en

12 THE AZORES

From hot springs to high-octane adventures, Portugal's archipelago has it all

While the Canary and Balearic Islands might be more frequently visited by tourists, a trip to the Azores can offer variety and excitement for a fraction of the cost.

Hopping between these nine characterful volcanic islands allows you to experience everything that the Azores have to offer. Whether you prefer leisurely ambling around historic towns or hightailing through volcanic vistas on an adventure tour, these colourful destinations deliver memorable experiences at every turn.

Most journeys through the Azores begin on its largest island, São Miguel. Nicknamed 'the green island' (ilha verde) for its abundance of natural beauty, this is a land where volcano biking tours can be interspersed with luxurious dips in the naturally heated waters of thermal springs and serene walks around hydrangea-lined calderas.

Sete Cidades is a particular highlight, with 12 kilometres (7.5 miles) of trails bordering two impressive lakes. It's said that these waters contain the tears of two lovers – a green-eyed princess and a blue-eyed shepherd, whose forbidden romance and reluctant separation led to the formation of lakes matching the colours of their eyes.

Elsewhere on São Miguel, it's worth spending some time in Ponta Delgada, the Azores' largest city and economic capital. Immerse yourself in the local culture while you meander between bars and restaurants, sampling affordable plates of petiscos (Portuguese tapas) and cocktails while bobbing along to the beat of live bands.

Ponta Delgada happens to be an ideal base for some of São Miguel's best day trips. A 20-minute westward drive will take you to Caldeira Velha, a waterfall and hot spring where you can take a dip in the surrounds of jungle-like foliage. After your geothermal bath, continue west to Furnas and try the local delicacy, Cozido das Furnas, a warm meaty stew cooked using volcanic steam.

You can easily fill a holiday with the fun that's to be had on São Miguel, but doing so means missing out on the Azores' eight other bountiful islands. Santa Maria is the southernmost, boasting warm weather and beautiful beaches. If you plan on visiting in August, be sure to stick around for Portugal's oldest music festival, Maré de Agosto.

Angra do Heroísmo is among the most impressive historic attractions on the island of Terceira. The whole city is classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site – you can easily spend a day here marvelling at the architecture of palaces, churches and museums dotted around its patterned streets.

The Azores is one of the best locations in the world for whale watching. Guided tours are available throughout the islands, but Faial features some of the most renowned ones. Board a boat in Horta and keep an eye out for some of Earth's biggest beasts, including sperm whales and blue whales.

Weather in the Azores can be unpredictable. While generally mild, the archipelago's oceanic climate can result in clouds and rain throughout the year. Bring a raincoat along with your bathing suit to ensure you're equipped to handle whatever the islands throw at you.

13 TUSCANY

Art, culture and history abound in Tuscany, the home of the Renaissance

Tuscany epitomises Italy's long-standing reputation for art, architecture and food. Florence is often regarded as the birthplace of the Renaissance; works by artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael are on display throughout its museums. The most notable of these is the Uffizi. Allow yourself a day to marvel at the masterpieces in this world-renowned gallery, from Botticelli's The Birth of Venus to Leonardo da Vinci's Annunciation.

Other artistic must-visits in Florence include the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Museo degli Argenti and Galleria dell'Accademia. The latter is home to Michelangelo's David, one of the most famous statues in the world.

Just over an hour's drive from Florence is Siena. The medieval city is a work of art in itself: its majestic cathedral (known locally as Duomo di Siena) is the result of a century-spanning collaboration between Italy's most prestigious architects and artists; while the Piazza del Campo provides a stunning spot to grab coffee or aperitivo while admiring the Palazzo Pubblico and Torre del Mangia.

The Palio di Siena is an event that carries the full weight of Tuscan tradition. This urban horse race dates back to 1644, with ten bareback horses and riders representing Siena's numerous contrade (city wards). Although the race lasts less than 90 seconds, its worldwide appeal means hotels become booked up months in advance. Plan your visit ahead of time if you want to witness the spectacle, which takes place twice every summer.

Tuscany offers some of Italy's very best food and drink. Local specialities are often based on peasant traditions, and epitomised by the concept of 'cucina povera' – making the most of the best locally grown ingredients to produce hearty and affordable plates of food. Foodies should tour the region in search of signature dishes associated with each city, town and village. Look out for Bistecca alla Fiorentina steak in Florence, pici pasta in Siena, pecorino cheese in Pienza, and world-renowned Tuscan extra virgin olive oil wherever you go.

Looking for a postcard-perfect photo of a world-famous landmark? A trip to Tuscany is incomplete without stopping in Pisa, the city synonymous with its iconic Leaning Tower. The skew-whiff structure draws crowds throughout the year, so buy tickets in advance if you plan on climbing to the top. Don't forget Pisa's other architectural triumphs – the Piazza dei Miracoli also includes a cathedral, baptistery, cemetery and museum, which are well worth a look.

For a quieter escape, the picturesque Monti Dell'Uccellina (Mountains of the Little Bird) are hard to beat. Wooded mountains meet pristine beaches in a stretch of coastal scenery that remains largely unspoiled by tourism. Enjoy nature while wandering between landmarks, such as the ruined Abbey of San Rabano and the towers of Castel Marino. If you're lucky, you might spot some deer and wild boars.

The lifestyle in Tuscany tends to be laid back and friendly. Many Italian shops and businesses take a 'pausa pranzo' in the middle of the day (roughly between 1pm and 3.30pm), closing for a couple of hours to spend time with friends and family. To make up for lost profits, many shops stay open later in the evening, until about 8pm. Then, you can grab a nice evening meal.

Weather-wise, Tuscany experiences blazing heat in July and August. If you plan on visiting outside the summer, bring layers to equip yourself for varied temperatures and the cooler climes of Tuscany's hills and mountains.

Siena is a city of food, art, architecture and the Palio - a horse race held twice a year

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Most restaurants in Tuscany stop serving lunch at around 2.30pm, so eat early to avoid disappointment.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to October

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

USEFUL SITES

discovertuscany.com
lovefromtuscany.com
tuscanychic.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Tuscany is known for its hilly terrain and cobblestones. However, there are plenty of accessible tours around larger cities like Florence or Pisa.

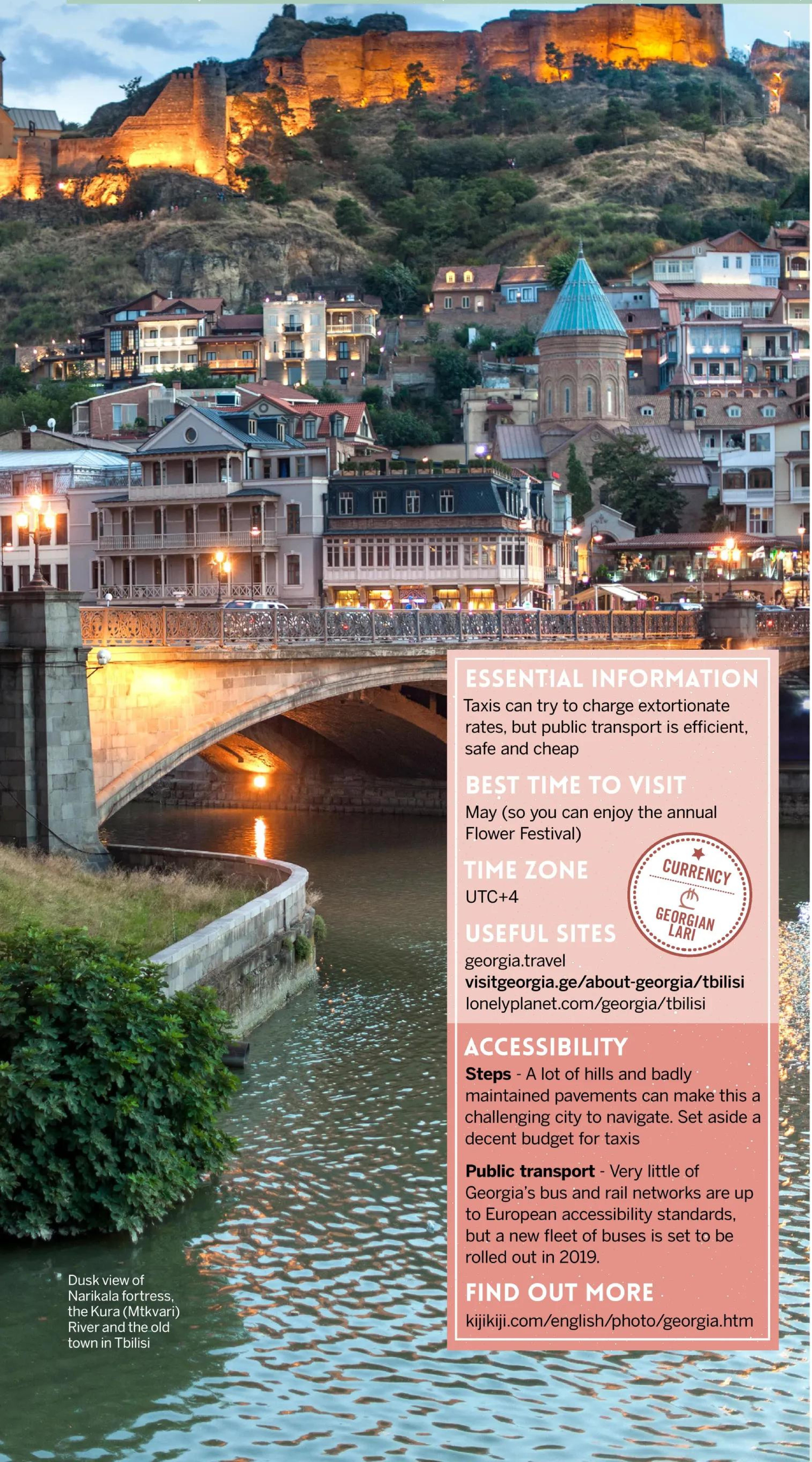
Public transport - Many small towns are connected by public transport, but this is not always accessible. Driving is highly recommended.

FIND OUT MORE

sagetraveling.com/tuscany-disabled-access

14 TBILISI

This medieval city in the heart of the Caucasus is ready for the future



Dusk view of Narikala fortress, the Kura (Mtkvari) River and the old town in Tbilisi

Tbilisi, a city whose fiery spirit was once supressed by its Soviet occupiers, is blooming. Along the Kura (Mtkvari) River, fancy hotels, lively nightclubs and world-class restaurants attract locals and tourists alike. Get a feel for Georgia's unique culture and beautiful language as you walk its streets, and listen to the Georgian music coming out of each bar.

This culture-rich city is now even easier to get to, with cheap flights recently introduced from a number of European countries. Georgia is a fascinating country, a wild place that until a few decades ago, the world knew little about – and Tbilisi is the perfect place to start your tour.

The old town is a colourful and charming neighbourhood, small enough to explore by foot, but big enough to get serendipitously lost in. Its 19th-century wooden mansions (many featuring elaborate balconies) are all painted in an array of colours. They might look a little on the 'distressed' side, but it's part of their charm.

It almost looks like something out of a Disney film – and nowhere is this more apparent than at the Clock Tower. This higgledy-piggledy tower and its adjacent puppet theatre were built in 2010 by Rezo Gabriadze. Every hour, an angel comes out of the clock to ring the bell, and twice a day you can watch a show in the puppet theatre – it's better than Punch and Judy.

Head out of the Old Town to Rike Park and then look up to the sky. Directly above you, you'll find the imposing Narikala fortress, which has protected the city and the Kura (Mtkvari) River valley since the 4th century. Inside its battlements, you can look around a newly restored Eastern Orthodox Church, complete with lavish dome paintings. If you're feeling a touch adventurous, you can walk to the top – but it's much more fun to take the cable car from Rike Park, which was installed in 2012.

The cable car is just one example of Tbilisi's extensive efforts to modernise and keep pace with other cities in Europe. In another corner of Rike Park, you can find the uber-modern Peace Bridge across the Kura (Mtkvari). Built by the joint efforts of Georgian, French and Italian firms, the bridge symbolises the new Georgia.

But let's not forget that old-fashioned Georgia has its own merits, including the hot sulphur baths – perfect for soaking in at the end of the day. With a constant water temperature of 38 to 40 degrees Celsius (100.4 to 104 degrees Fahrenheit), it's pretty balmy in there – and also a little bit smelly. Don't let that put you off, though. The locals claim the warm, mineral-packed waters will cure a range of ills, from skin conditions to stress to insomnia.

Tbilisi's fusion of the old and the new works in perfect harmony with the relaxed Georgian lifestyle. But don't just take our word for it, experience it for yourself – this mountainous little country may surprise and enchant you.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Taxis can try to charge extortionate rates, but public transport is efficient, safe and cheap

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May (so you can enjoy the annual Flower Festival)

TIME ZONE

UTC+4

CURRENCY
₾
GEORGIAN LARI

USEFUL SITES

georgia.travel
visitgeorgia.ge/about-georgia/tbilisi
lonelyplanet.com/georgia/tbilisi

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - A lot of hills and badly maintained pavements can make this a challenging city to navigate. Set aside a decent budget for taxis

Public transport - Very little of Georgia's bus and rail networks are up to European accessibility standards, but a new fleet of buses is set to be rolled out in 2019.

FIND OUT MORE

kijikiji.com/english/photo/georgia.htm

Santa Is Here
JOULUPUKKI
SANTA CLAUS
TAIGAKORU

With a selection of cabins, glass igloos and hotels, there is accommodation to suit every taste at Santa Claus Village

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Purchase the Aurora Alert SMS service, which notifies visitors when the northern lights are visible.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

January to March (for winter sports and northern lights)

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY
€
EURO

USEFUL SITES

nationalparks.fi
kakslauttanen.fi
santaclausvillage.info

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Snow can make walking and using a wheelchair or walker difficult. Many hotels provide snowsuits and boots, and sometimes even sledge transport for longer journey.

Public transport - There are several bus connections available across Lapland, as well as tour buses.

FIND OUT MORE

ta-da.org.uk/lapland-finland

15 LAPLAND

Take a trip to the edge of the world, in Finland's own adventure playground

Near-mythical Lapland lives in the imagination. A world of extremes, its midnight sun surrenders to the polar night come November, and popular ski resorts make way for desolate subarctic wilderness. 'The lapin taika' or 'the magic of Lapland', is kept alive by the indigenous Sámi peoples, whose ancient singing, the trancelike yoik, is said to evoke the very essence of a person, animal or place. Silvery forests, wild reindeer and snow-laden fells add to the enchantment – as does Father Christmas, who 'officially' calls Lapland home. But perhaps most magical of all are the aurora borealis, or northern lights.

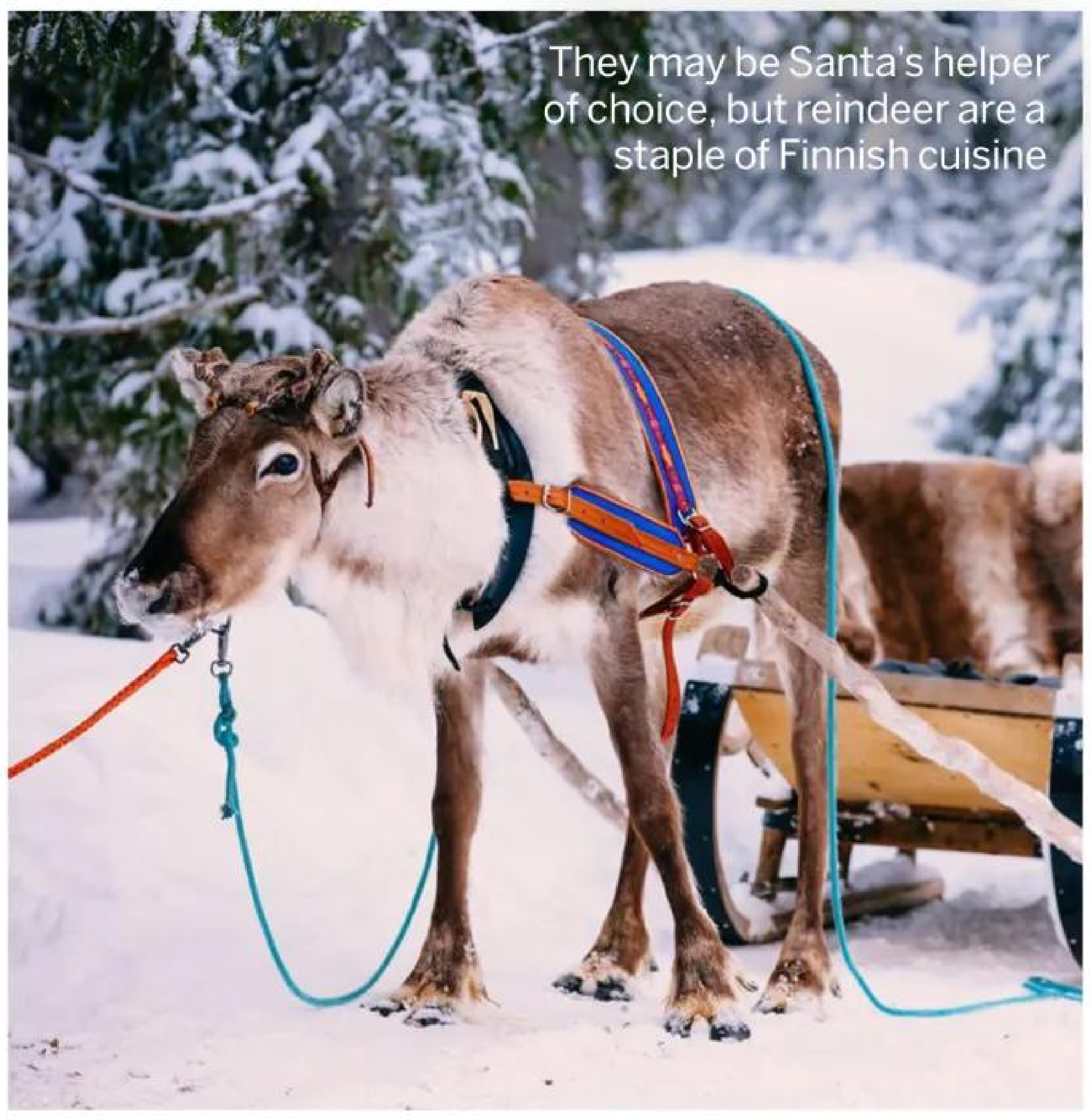
Vast and silent, Lapland's remoteness makes it a mecca for the most dedicated aurora chasers – though not all who search will bear witness to Mother Nature's sensational light show. Although visible from late August until mid April, the natural phenomenon is famously unpredictable. According to Sámi legend, the lights are the dancing souls of those who have passed away, and onlookers should refrain from pointing at them. Starting out slowly, green tendrils stretch across the inky sky, before bursting into dancing curtains of colour. These are joined by yellow and purple light, radiating from every direction, as snow sparkles underfoot, reflecting the sequined sky.

With sightings of the 'tricky lady' few and far between, Finnish Lapland is no less a winter wonderland. Come November, as the long winter sets in, the sun breathes its last breath and the polar night finally takes hold. The sun will not truly rise again until late January – instead, skirting just below the horizon, it will cast beautiful sunset shades of violet, blue and, at its very brightest, pink.

Despite the short days, and relative darkness, the season is seen not as a time to lament the fallen sun, but one when the greatest memories are formed. From husky sledding and snowmobiling to skiing, snowshoe hiking and ice fishing, there are myriad ways to explore the magical icy tundra. When adventure has been had and exhaustion hits, long nights are spent exchanging stories and feasting on freshly caught salmon, roasted on a crackling fire.

For snow bunnies and thrill-seekers, Lapland's versatile ski resorts offer everything from to black runs to kids' slopes, with cross-country exploring aplenty for solitary souls. The 'big four' – Levi, Ylläs, Pyhä-Luosto and Ruka – on the fringes of Europe's largest wilderness, boast some of Lapland's prettiest pistes.

Levi is the most popular, with two snow parks, a variety of slopes and lively après-ski



They may be Santa's helper of choice, but reindeer are a staple of Finnish cuisine

PERHAPS MOST MAGICAL OF ALL ARE THE AURORA BOREALIS, OR NORTHERN LIGHTS

One in five Finns own a traditional holiday cottage, often equipped with a sauna

Forget horsepower, huskies are renowned for their speed and endurance, running up to 25kph (16mph)

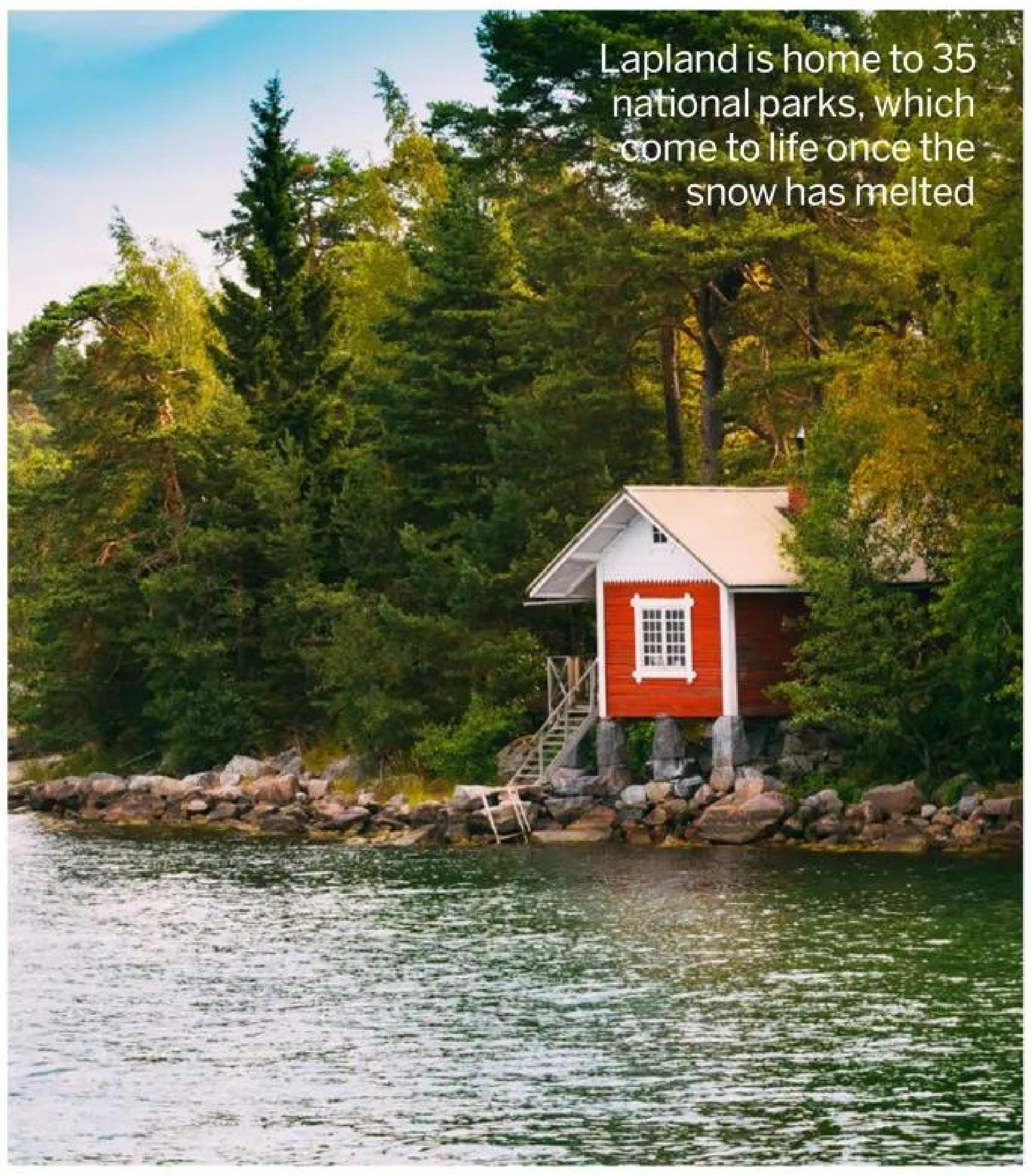
culture. Meanwhile, the twin resorts of Pyhä and Luosto are the most laid-back, famous for their picturesque backcountry and freeriding zones. But many argue that Ylläs, with its six fells, takes the crown as a keen skier's paradise. It's been luring visitors since 1957, when its first ski lift was opened. While floodlights keep many of the slopes open during the polar night, nature provides all the illumination one could hope for by February, until the snow melts around May.

With the dark winter over, Lapland bursts into colour, before being bathed in 24-hour sunlight as the midnight sun ushers in a fitting contrast to the winter night. The long days and temperate weather call for hikes, horseback rides and canoeing.

Sprawling 285,550 hectares (705,609 acres) towards Norway's border, Lemmenjoki is Finland's largest national park. Endless pine forests, rugged fells and mirror-like rivers make it ideal hiking territory, as does the smattering of juicy berries, just waiting to be picked and baked into a hot, sweet pie. It's also prime gold real estate, where solitary prospectors splash away with their pans.

West of Lemmenjoki National Park lies Inari village, the cultural heart of Sámi culture – home to its parliament, the Siida museum and a series of handicraft shops. From its position on the edge of Lake Inari, the country's largest, the ancient Sámi sacrificial site of Ukonsaari Island is a short boat ride away. Dedicated to Ukko, the god of thunder, people would travel to the isle to pray for favourable winds, making offerings to the deities. Even today, some locals still visit and flip a coin into the water, asking for the same.

Another natural marvel, Oulanka National Park features hanging bridges, crystal-clear waterfalls and a variety of hiking trails – some suitable for children, others requiring careful navigation up precarious rock walls. For adrenaline junkies, it's also home to category three, four and five rapids.



Lapland is home to 35 national parks, which come to life once the snow has melted

Arguably the easiest of Lapland's multi-day hikes, the 55-kilometre (34-mile) Hetta-Pallas Trail passes through Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park. The scenic route is dotted with quaint wilderness cabins, some with saunas, where weary travellers can rest their heads for the night.

Finland's eastern borderlands offer a unique opportunity to view the magnificent brown bear in its natural habitat, amid ancient coniferous forests, with honey buzzards circling overhead. Overnight stays in a cabin-like hide enable visitors to go unnoticed, so the bears are not disturbed, as they gorge on deer or elk.

One of the world's largest carnivores, the Arctic polar bear can reach weights of up to 800kg (1,543lbs)

THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

The Arctic Circle sits at the periphery of the known world, stretching across the Arctic Sea, into Finland, Sweden, Norway, Russia, Denmark, Iceland, Canada and the United States. It is an unforgiving land, a land where migrating polar bears battle walruses for food in the summer, and survival in the winter.

Only the most resilient and well-adapted can live here, from the short 'twisted wood' krummholz, which live for hundreds of years, to the herbivorous reindeer and the Arctic tern – which migrates 19,000 kilometres (11,800 miles) between the two poles every year. It is the only region in the world where the wolf is not endangered, but thrives.

It takes a special breed of person to call the Arctic home, but many do – roughly four million to be precise, representing 40 ethnicities. Though cultures vary, like the polar bear they have all felt the encroaching hand of climate change and rapidly increasing industrialisation.

You could spend your whole trip just walking the streets of this stunning city, enjoying the beautiful buildings

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The Vienna Pass is an good purchase if you plan on visiting a few attractions, and includes the open-top buses.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

All year round

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

USEFUL SITES

viennapass.com
viennaconcerts.com
wien.info/en

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Vienna is proud of its step-free experience. Pavements are flat, transport hubs use lifts and tourist attractions are accessible.

Public transport - All subway stations have lifts and most trams have wheelchair spaces. Transport hubs often have low curbs or ramps in order to be more accessible.

FIND OUT MORE

visitingvienna.com/transport/accessibility

16

VIENNA

Palaces, Baroque streetscapes and works of art define Austria's capital

Situated on the Danube River, this spectacular city has been home to some of the greatest minds, from Mozart and Beethoven to Sigmund Freud.

Much of the city's grandeur is a lasting legacy of the powerful Habsburg Monarchy. Schönbrunn Palace, their summer residence, is a must-see with its pristine gardens and stunning interiors. Take a quirky horse-drawn carriage through the beautiful gardens or wander around the tranquil fountains. Next to the palace you'll find Vienna's zoo, or Tiergarten Schönbrunn, which is home to red pandas, jaguars, tigers and so much more – if you get the Vienna Pass, both the Zoo and Palace are included.

In the centre of the city you will find the Vienna State Opera House (Wiener Staatsoper), which is one of the leading opera houses in the world. Each season, the state opera house offers around 350 performances of more than 60 different operas and ballets, from world-class artists to the permanent ensemble who perform various operas, including Cinderella and Giselle. Get dressed up and spend an evening at the opera for a truly Viennese evening of opulence and sophistication. Tickets for the opera can start as low as £11 ($14.50), so it is definitely worth going for the experience, even if you don't think opera is your thing – you might be surprised. Each seat has a small screen with English subtitles to help you follow along if you don't speak the language, too.

The Spanish Riding School is another must for any trip to Vienna. Even if you just take a wander through the stunning buildings where it is situated and catch a tiptoed glance at the training arena, you won't be disappointed. The Spanish Riding School is the only institution in the world that has practised for more than 450 years. There are various tours and events that you can buy tickets for, from the morning training sessions to more lavish shows – it's a worthwhile and unique experience.

The city's museum quarter (Museumsquartier) features the Leopold Museum, with its numerous works by Schiele; the popular Museum of Contemporary Art; and the Kunsthalle, which is an array of restaurants, cafes and bars that make this area of the city an essential part of your trip.

If you get bored of the bigger museums and galleries, then why not venture to the Sigmund Freud Museum? The permanent exhibition is located in the former living quarters and office of Freud, and is a fascinating presentation of the great mind's life and work. From March 2019 until 2020, the museum will (unfortunately) be closed for construction in order to preserve original details, but you will still be able to visit the Moving Freud Museum just a few steps away from the original premises.

Vienna is known for its sumptuous coffeehouse culture, where decadent coffee is served on silver trays alongside delicate cakes and sweet treats. You can't visit Vienna without trying Sachertorte, which is a chocolate cake created by Franz Sacher in 1832 for Prince Wenzel von Metternich in Vienna. The chocolate cake has a layer of apricot jam in the middle, and is topped with a shimmering chocolate glaze. It is one of the most famous Viennese culinary specialities. If sweet treats and creamy coffee aren't for you, head to a traditional pub and enjoy a Wiener schnitzel or warming goulash washed down with a stein of beer.

17 DUBROVNIK

Croatia's stunning seaport is worthy of its world-renowned reputation

With its enticing combination of history, culture and coastal scenery, it's no wonder that Dubrovnik has become one of the most popular choices for European holidays in recent years.

Begin your tour of Dubrovnik with a walk along its iconic city walls. The two-kilometre (1.2-mile) stretch provides some of the best views of the Old Town, as well as stunning panoramas of the azure-tinted Adriatic Sea. The first of Dubrovnik's city walls were constructed in the 9th century, with defences being fortified in the 14th century, and forts added to protect against Turkish attacks in the 15th century. These fortresses can be observed as you walk the walls, and your admission ticket will give you access to Fort Lovrijenac, one of the city's most fascinating fortresses and a recognisable filming location from Game of Thrones.

Access to the city walls is granted via two historic gates, Pile and Ploce. Pile is more popular among tourists, so you can get a jump on the crowds by starting your stroll at Ploce. The walk provides little shelter and can be notoriously hot on sunny days, so prepare for scorching weather and take lots of water to avoid overpaying at opportunistic vendors.

Other historic sights to witness in Dubrovnik include Rector's Palace, a Gothic-Renaissance palace that doubles as a cultural history museum; the Franciscan Monastery, which houses a 14th-century pharmacy; and the Large Onofrio's Fountain, which spews drinkable water from the mouths of 16 ornately carved masks.

You can take in the whole city at once from Srd, a 412-metre (1,352-foot) hill that overlooks Dubrovnik and provides unbeatable views of the Old Town, the island of Lokrum and the Elafiti Islands. The easiest and most enjoyable route to the top is via cable car – head up just before sunset to see Dubrovnik at its most enchanting and magical.

Once you're done sightseeing, why not mix things up with a spot of sea kayaking? The activity is a popular pastime in Dubrovnik, and a fun way to get active while enjoying a different perspective of the local scenery. It's easy enough to kayak your way across to the lush island of Lokrum as part of a guided tour. The car-free isle is a popular spot for swimming and relaxing on the beach, and is a tranquil retreat.

All that walking and paddling is hungry work. Luckily enough, Dubrovnik is filled with restaurants that serve some of the best food in Croatia. The specialities here are based on locally caught seafood, and include grilled fish and squid risotto – head to Lokanda Peskarija or Restaurant Proto for some of the best.

For a drink, D'vino offers cosy vibes and an excellent selection of Croatian wine, making it a popular choice, or you can enjoy intoxicating ocean views while sipping beverages at one of two popular cliff-top bars: Buža I and Buža II.

Dubrovnik's Cathedral is a symbol of Catholic grandeur, its white marble gleaming in the sunshine

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Buy a Dubrovnik Card for free access to many popular attractions, including the city walls

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to June

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

CURRENCY
Kn
CROATIAN KUNA

USEFUL SITES

dubrovnikcard.com

visit-croatia.co.uk/croatia-destinations/dubrovnik

chasingthedonkey.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Many of Dubrovnik's main attractions can be accessed by ramps. Although cobbly, paths and walkways are generally wide enough for comfortable walking.

Public transport - Dubrovnik's newer buses have ramps at the middle doors or floors that lower for easy access. Wheelchair friendly taxis are available for airport transfers.

FIND OUT MORE

blog.handiscover.com/content/tips-articles/wheelchair-accessible-dubrovnik

18 ROME

Visit the stunning capital of Italy and experience a part of history

Italy's capital will take you on a journey into the past while enabling you to enjoy the cosmopolitan buzz of a fashionable city. Explore ancient Roman ruins, soak up the art and culture, and enjoy the incredible cuisine.

Begin your day with a trip to the Colosseum, then take a walk through the Roman Forum and on to the Pantheon. The Colosseum is a spectacle not to be missed – it's the largest amphitheatre ever built, and still an icon of Imperial Rome. Even if you don't want to venture inside, you'll really regret not taking the time to see it in person. The area around it can feel a little daunting; the roads are wide and busy, but there are some lovely restaurants close by where you can enjoy a traditional lasagne with a view of the spectacular structure. The Colosseum is striking at any time of day, but imagine sitting in view of it with a glass of Italian wine as the sun sets and streams through its many arches. We really can't think of many things better than starting and ending your day at this stunning building.

The Roman Forum is another iconic landmark of the Roman Empire. It's filled with temples, squares and old government buildings that are well worth taking a stroll around. You can explore it alone or join a tour to learn about the interesting history of the site. Nearby the Pantheon is a 2,000-year-old temple, the best preserved of all of Rome's ancient monuments. It is one of the most influential buildings in the Western world. Venturing through its large, bronze doors and into the largest unreinforced concrete dome ever built is probably as awe-inspiring and breathtaking as it was when it was first constructed. Despite its age, it's still as stunning as ever.

Vatican City, the independent city-state, is the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church. A trip to the Vatican should be left for a day when you have nothing else planned, as there is a lot to see. It's home to St Peter's Basilica and the Vatican Museums, which contain artistic masterpieces such as Michelangelo's awe-inspiring Sistine Chapel frescoes.

The Vatican is by far the city's most popular tourist destination, so be prepared for a lot of people and many queues. If this fills you with dread, be sure to avoid Wednesdays, as this is usually when the Papal Audience takes place. This is when the Pope is in Rome, meaning there will be even more people. In the warmer months, this is often held in St Peter's Square, so if you do want to get a glimpse of the Pope then head on down. Visiting the Vatican Museums with a tour is by far the best way to do it, and between April and October you can book to visit the museum at night, which means there are fewer people to cope with. If you plan on visiting St Peter's Basilica, then you must be dressed appropriately – no bare knees, midriffs or shoulders on show.

You can't move in Rome without a picture-perfect vista in your sights

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Watch out for pickpockets, especially around busy piazzas and packed tourist destinations.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to October (if you want to see the Pope!)

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

USEFUL SITES

rome.info
vaticantickets.org
colosseum-rome-tickets.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - There are inclines, stairways and uneven cobbled streets across the city. Some of the more popular attractions include elevators so you can avoid the steeper slopes.

Public transport - Bus and metro lines run throughout the city, but few are wheelchair-friendly. Specialised accessible tours are available.

FIND OUT MORE

romewise.com/accessible-rome.html

19 WEST HIGHLAND LINE

On this scenic railway journey, you can take a trip through Scottish history

It's a trip of only five and a half hours, but this 264-kilometre-long journey from Glasgow to the fishing port of Mallaig is spectacular. Construction began in 1889, with the aim of linking Glasgow to Fort William, but the work was not without its challenges as it crossed remote parts of the windy Scottish Highlands, and the line was not completed until 1894. Conditions were harsh, cold, and lonely. 37 navvies died in just four years. The line was later extended to the coast, and the link to Mallaig opened in 1901.

After leaving behind the tenements, art galleries and stone streets of Glasgow, the train winds along the 'bonnie banks' of lovely Loch Lomond – Britain's largest body of fresh water – then chugs on to Crianlarich, where a branch line runs to the seaside resort of Oban. The scenery becomes increasingly rugged and further on, past Tyndrum (once the heart of the Scottish gold mining industry) a giant horseshoe curve winds through a glacial valley – a reminder that funds for the construction of tunnels and viaducts were limited, so obstacles (such as mountains) were skirted around instead. After the sleepy village of Bridge of Orchy, the train traverses desolate Rannoch Moor and eventually reaches remote Corrour station, which featured in the film of Irvine Welsh's novel Trainspotting.

After it leaves Fort William, the gateway to Ben Nevis (The UK's highest mountain), the line passes a number of sites of historic interest. At Banavie, suggested by some as the birthplace of Saint Patrick, the train crosses Thomas Telford's Caledonian Canal, characterised at this point by 'Neptune's Staircase', a series of eight locks designed by Telford in 1822. Then comes the glorious 21-arched Glenfinnan Viaduct, constructed in concrete by Robert McAlpine and opened in 1901. Today it's most famous for the starring role it plays in the Harry Potter films, but the viaduct also offers excellent views of the Glenfinnan Monument. This 18-metre-high tower designed by architect James Gillespie Grant commemorates the start of the Jacobite Rising in 1745, when Bonnie Prince Charlie raised his standard above Glenfinnan. His fight to claim the throne (supported by English, as well as Scottish Jacobites) ended at the Battle of Culloden the following year. A lone highlander stands atop the tower – a reminder that the defeat effectively ended the highland way of life. Further along the route, the train passes Loch nan Uamh from where he escaped to France after Culloden.

Trains run regularly along the line. In summer a special steam-hauled train, the Jacobite, runs from Fort William to Mallaig (www.westcoastrailways.co.uk) while the luxurious Royal Scotsman train also follows the route (www.belmond.com/royal-scotsman-train).

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Trains on British rail are of varying quality, so a special train might be best.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May until August, to see Scotland's greenery in all its glory

TIME ZONE

UTC

CURRENCY
£
GREAT BRITISH POUND

USEFUL SITES

bit.ly/35RPYbs
westhighlandline.org.uk
bit.ly/1Kw5jLz

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Getting on and off is no issue. The Scottish Accessible Transport Alliance has concerns about newer trains being less accessibility-friendly.

Public transport - ScotRail allows you to reserve special assistance up to two hours before departure. More notice is required for smaller, rural stations.

FIND OUT MORE

scotrail.co.uk/plan-your-journey/accessible-travel

For the best view of the Alhambra, go to Mirador de San Nicolás in Albaicín

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Buy your tickets online – or be prepared to queue for them overnight.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Spring and early summer

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

USEFUL SITES

alhambra.org/en/
tickets.alhambra-patronato.es/en/
alhambra.info/en/alhambra.asp

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Half the Alhambra is relatively flat with ramp access over steps. Other areas have stairs and uneven cobbled floors, which may be inaccessible to those with limited mobility.

Public transport - The Alhambra ticket office can be reached from Granada city centre by several bus routes. Also consider taking specialised accessible tours, which will provide pickups from hotels.

FIND OUT MORE

visitgranada.net/alhambra/disabled

20 THE ALHAMBRA

Spain's stunning Moorish palace is adorned with eye-catching Islamic art

Known for its perfectly Instagrammable gardens, intricate geometric archways and bright-blue fountains, the Alhambra in the Andalusian city of Granada is one of Europe's finest examples of Islamic art and architecture. But the Alhambra doesn't just offer one castle – it has three.

What began life as a Roman mountain fortress would be completely transformed by the Moorish Nasrid dynasty, whose roots lay in what is now Saudi Arabia. The 12th-century ruler Muhammad I of Granada saw the old Roman fortification's potential, and rebuilt it to overlook the city.

His successors continued his work and added a palace fit for a king – or a sultan. The complex design also included a marketplace, public baths, offices and workshops, essentially making it a city within a city. Decorated floor to ceiling with delicate patterns, Arabic calligraphy and white marble, the Alhambra's Nasrid Palace and its gardens were also kitted out with the latest technology, including an irrigation system for the Generalife Gardens.

But after the re-Christianisation of Spain in 1492, the new Catholic kings and queens built their own palace on the site, to overshadow the one built by the nation's former Muslim rulers. The Palace of Carlos V's classic Renaissance styling contrasts starkly with the Nasrid buildings, but somehow it works.

The old city of Granada and the Alhambra absolutely must be seen by anyone travelling in southern Spain, but to make the most of your trip you'll need to plan carefully. Be sure to buy your tickets well in advance, as they only sell a few hundred tickets on the door each day – and people will queue up overnight to grab them. Your ticket specifies an entry time for the Nasrid palaces, but you are free to wander around the rest of the complex at your leisure.

Once you've made your way past the entrance gates, you'll find yourself in the Generalife Gardens, inspired by the paradise gardens of Persia. You'll discover a huge variety of colourful flowers, flowing water features and shady spots under fruit trees, and you could spend hours here – but you'll have to tear yourself away from it all to visit the magnificent palaces themselves.

To see how the Christian kings tried to outshine their Arab predecessors, visit the Palace of Carlos V – though you can only explore the inner courtyard. This is a perfect circle, reminiscent of Spain's famous bullrings.

When your time comes, cross the threshold into the Nasrid palaces, which include the famous Court of the Lions. Look out for gorgeous Arabesque patterns in the doorways all around the palace – the delight is in the detail. Stained glass windows give the palace a burst of colour when it catches the light, and if you peer out of them, you'll see yet more colourful gardens below.

For a taste of the Alhambra's original purpose, clamber along the battlements of the Alcazaba, an Arab fort built over Roman ruins. When you reach the top, survey the Sierra Nevada mountains, the Alhambra complex and the city of Granada from your vantage point – you'll soon understand why this place has been prized by generals, kings and sultans for centuries.

21 OSLO

One of Europe's most walkable capitals, Oslo offers treats for all the senses

Norway's capital city was founded around 1049 by King Harald Hardrada. It burned down in the 17th century and was rebuilt and renamed Kristiana, a name it kept until 1925, when it was changed back to Oslo. Since then, it has gone through a massive renovation and today it feels like an incredibly modern city. The city is surrounded by nature with the mountains to its north, the fjord to its south and you're never too far from a park or other green space.

To take in the more historic side of Oslo, begin with a walk down Karl Johans gate. Starting at the Royal Palace, go past the National Theatre and Parliament building and head to the Grand Cafe. Opened in 1874, this is where, allegedly, Edvard Munch proposed to trade his painting 'The Sick Child' for one hundred steak dinners. If you wanted to get a look at this painting and other works by Munch, including perhaps his best-known work 'The Scream,' it's a 20-minute walk over to the Munch Museum. The museum hosts around 28,000 pieces that were created by the Norwegian artist.

All around the city are amazing pieces of architecture for you to see, but this is best displayed in the port district. As you walk around, you are surrounded by the Deichman Bjørvika, Oslo's public library, the Opera House and Astruo Fearnley Museum of Modern Art. When hopping from one place to another, find a convenience store or stall selling pølse, a hotdog topped with a potato-based soft flatbread or a waffle, if you have more of a sweet tooth.

Oslo is notorious for being one of the most expensive cities to live in, but don't let this put you off as there are plenty of things to do that won't cost you a penny. Oslo is full of green spaces as previously mentioned, and it's easy to get about on foot or bike, although there is a reliable public transport system if you need it.

The Royal Palace in Oslo

Oslo is surrounded by nature

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Oslo's National Museum is closed on Mondays and is open fewer hours on Sunday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday

BEST TIME TO VISIT

It is quieter around the winter months, however places like the Royal Palace are only open during summer months.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY
kr
KRONER

USEFUL SITES

visitoslo.com
visitnorway.com
oslo.kommune.no

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Many museums and parks offer assistance for those with mobility issues. City centre hotels will offer more accessibility than those outside.

Public transport - Wheelchair users travel for free on public transport operated by Ruter

FIND OUT MORE

visitnorway.com/plan-your-trip/travelling-with-disabilities/

22 PRAGUE

Explore the stunning attractions of the Czech Republic's capital city

Church of Our Lady before Týn by the Old Town Square

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Watch out for currency scams offering 0% commission – and certainly don't exchange on the streets of Prague!

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Spring and early autumn

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

CURRENCY
Kč
CZECH KORUNA

USEFUL SITES

prague.eu/en
hrad.cz/en
jewishmuseum.cz/en/info/visit

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Many tourist sites are accessible, or use portable ramps to ensure that tourists with limited mobility can gain access.

Public transport - Two thirds of metro stations are wheelchair accessible. Newer trams have wheelchair boarding ramps. Not all stations are accessible, so planning ahead is key.

FIND OUT MORE

wheelchairtravel.org/prague

Prague is nicknamed the 'city of a hundred spires', but it doesn't take long before you realise this architectural gem, nestled within the Czech Republic and cut through by the Vltava River, cannot solely be defined by such a single set of features. Not withstanding the fact that it's factually incorrect – there are more than 1,000 spires, turrets, steeples and towers gently punching the air over this capital city – Prague can be anything to anyone: romantic, fashionable, artistic, bustling and quiet on the one hand; a foodie's paradise, eclectic watering hole or simply a chocolate-box feast for the eyes on the other.

Take a boat ride soon after you arrive and you can soak up the splendour of those medieval buildings, unspoiled by war and modern development, before putting your feet on firm ground in pursuit of the key attractions. Get your timing right and you'll be able to see the world's oldest working astronomical clock in action, a thing of beauty that dates back to 1410 and stands in the Old Town Square. A performance takes place every hour where four animated figures shake their heads to the ring of a bell while the 12 apostles filter past two open windows to the amazement of the massed crowds.

From there, you can make your way over to the Jewish Quarter, a historical area in which Jews were once restricted to living. There are six glorious synagogues, an old cemetery, the 18th-century Old Jewish Town Hall, and many monuments and artefacts that form the Jewish Museum in Prague. They can be seen by purchasing an entry ticket, and it's worth paying for the Old New Synagogue alone – it's Europe's oldest surviving and active synagogue, and steeped in legend.

Prague's compact nature means you can easily get around on foot. South of the Jewish Quarter is Charles Bridge, crossing the Vltava and enabling crowds to mass along a walkway some ten-metres (33-feet) wide. Construction of the bridge began in 1357, and it has seen numerous battles and natural disasters since then. Most notable here are 30 mostly Baroque statues and statuaries positioned across its length of 621 metres (2,037 feet). They're all replicas today, with the originals removed for safe keeping, but they're no less striking for it.

It certainly hasn't affected Prague's status as one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites, and that's little wonder. Each twist and turn of Prague's narrow streets offers up copious delights, and while you'll be charged to visit many of the splendid attractions, there's plenty to do for free. Wandering the complex around Prague Castle, which contains the Bohemian Crown Jewels, will cost you nothing (although entry to the castle will). There's also a huge, bronze horse statue (a monument to Hussite General Jan Žižka) on Vitkov Hill, and free tours of the Rudolfinum concert hall.

Whatever you do, don't leave without visiting the New Town, in particular the politically iconic Wenceslas Square and the National Museum. Be sure to also sample the traditional Czech soup kulajda; the thin pancakes called palacinky; or vepro-knedlo-zelo, which is roast pork, bread dumplings and stewed cabbage. Such food goes down well with beer, which is just as well since it is plentiful and cheap, and there are many breweries that encourage visitors. Just take it easy: with so much to see and do, you'll want a clear head come the morning, although a stroll around Letná Park may help – as long as you don't stop for a drink in its beer garden.

23 SARDINIA

Relax on some of Italy's best beaches, or take a road trip along the coast

Sardinia is a big island (the second largest in the Mediterranean, in fact) with plenty to enjoy. If you want to sunbathe and relax, Alghero could be just the place you're looking for. Here you can go down to the beach every morning and enjoy its 80-kilometre-long, white, sandy coastline; the water is shallow, beautifully clear and family-friendly. In the evening, take a walk through the Catalan Medieval old town, and shop for coral and Sardinian rugs – but be careful to wear comfortable shoes, as the streets are made of cobblestone.

If you aim to visit as much of the island as possible, renting a car is the best option, and the scenery on Sardinian roads is absolutely stunning. Take a break from your driving in Sassari, where, in August, you'd be able to see the Candelieri, a religious festival that's been taking place for over 700 years.

If you love Roman history, stop in Porto Torres to visit the Roman ruins – especially the thermal baths called the Palace of Re Barbaro, and the necropolis on Via Libio, which is accessible through a bar! Don't miss the Basilica of San Gavino, one of Sardinia's finest churches. Drive south to reach the 3,000-year-old sacred well and village of Santa Cristina, from the ancient Nuragic culture. Later, stop and visit Tharros, a Roman-Phoenician port next to the beach of San Giovanni. The Cabras Museum with the Mont'e Prama giants and the San Salvatore muristenes are also well worth a visit.

To complete your trip, drive south to Cagliari, and visit the streets of Marina and Castello. If you're lying on Poetto beach, you might be lucky enough to see colourful pink flamingos pass by.

THE SCENERY ON SARDINIAN ROADS IS ABSOLUTELY STUNNING

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Locals are hospitable and friendly, but not everyone will speak English.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June and September will be warm but not too hot – temperatures in July and August can reach 35-40°C

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

USEFUL SITES

sardegnaturismo.it/en
sardegnainblog.it/en
italia.it/en/discover-italy/sardinia

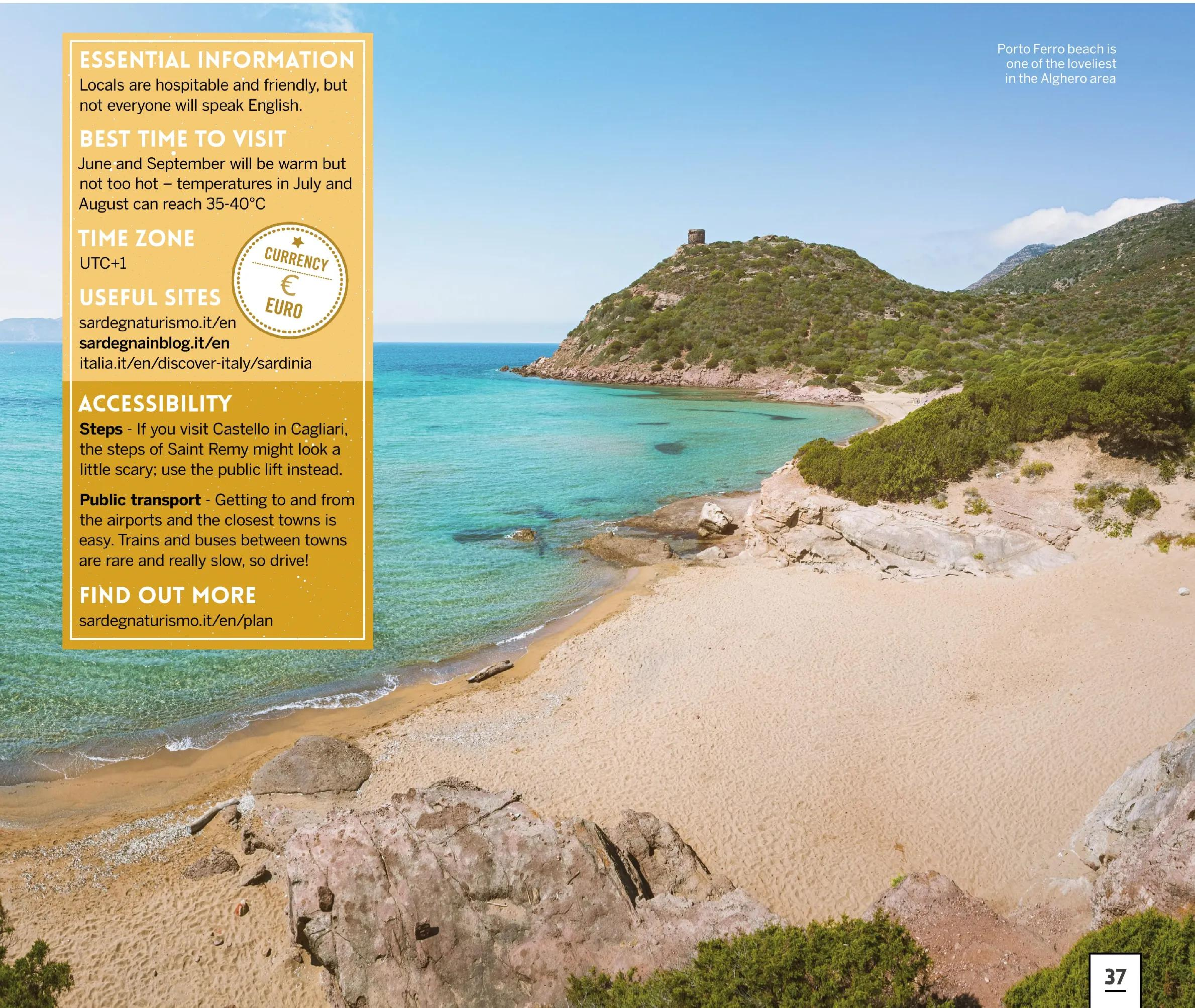
ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - If you visit Castello in Cagliari, the steps of Saint Remy might look a little scary; use the public lift instead.

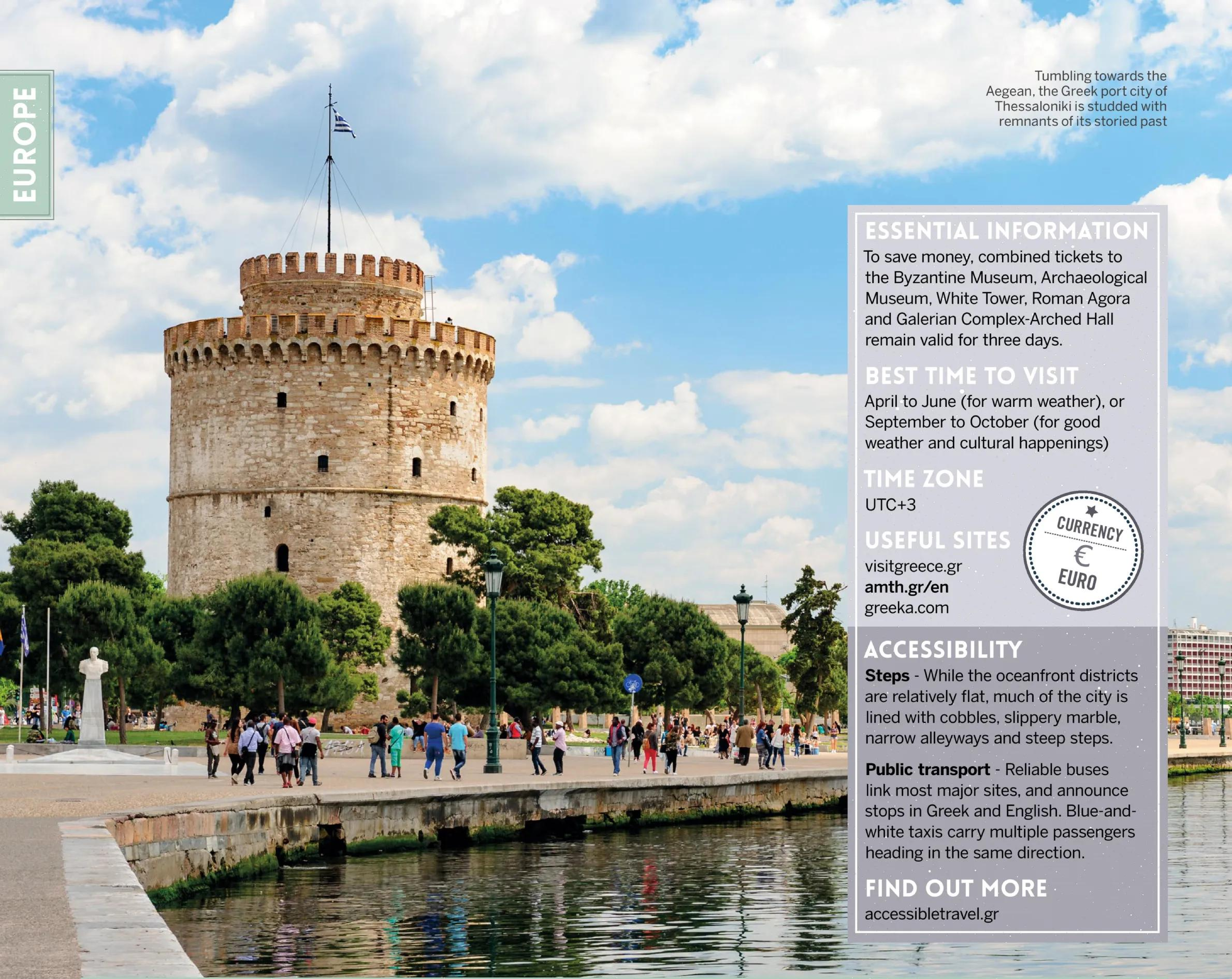
Public transport - Getting to and from the airports and the closest towns is easy. Trains and buses between towns are rare and really slow, so drive!

FIND OUT MORE

sardegnaturismo.it/en/plan



Porto Ferro beach is one of the loveliest in the Alghero area



Tumbling towards the Aegean, the Greek port city of Thessaloniki is studded with remnants of its storied past

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

To save money, combined tickets to the Byzantine Museum, Archaeological Museum, White Tower, Roman Agora and Galerian Complex-Arched Hall remain valid for three days.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to June (for warm weather), or September to October (for good weather and cultural happenings)

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

CURRENCY
€
EURO

USEFUL SITES

visitgreece.gr
amth.gr/en
greeka.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - While the oceanfront districts are relatively flat, much of the city is lined with cobbles, slippery marble, narrow alleyways and steep steps.

Public transport - Reliable buses link most major sites, and announce stops in Greek and English. Blue-and-white taxis carry multiple passengers heading in the same direction.

FIND OUT MORE

accessibletravel.gr

24 THESSALONIKI

Past and present collide as ancient edifices rub shoulders with art deco piles

A treasure trove of crumbling churches, ancient ruins and Islamic monuments, Greece's second city, Thessaloniki, is a living, breathing monument to its colourful past and the empires that ruled it – the Romans, the Byzantines and the Ottomans.

Known as the upper town, Ano Poli is a melange of traditional coffee shops (kafeneios) and ramshackle houses, which line the labyrinthine streets. Close by, the ascetic Vlatodon Monastery contains jewel-hued frescoes in glittering gold, green and blue.

From the Byzantine walls of Eptapyrgio, known as the Fortress of Seven Towers, the city unfurls below until it kisses the shore. From here, the crenellated White Tower can be spotted, dominating the seafront. Standing 34 metres high, the former prison has a harrowing history, marred by executions and massacre. Constructed by the Ottomans, legend suggests it was known as the Tower of Blood until a prisoner offered to paint it white in exchange for his freedom.

Nearby, the Museum of Byzantine Culture protects over 3,000 Byzantine artefacts within its walls, including crowns, jewellery and glassware. Across the road, the Archaeological Museum displays many of the region's most important Hellenistic and Roman discoveries. Highlights include items from tomb of Philip II, father of Alexander the Great, and Europe's oldest book.

To the north, the dome and minaret of the Rotunda of Galerius rise in harmony, symbols of the multitude of faiths it has served. Constructed as a pagan temple, it became a church before being converted into a mosque by the Ottomans. Today, mosaics and frescoes decorate the 30-metre-high dome. Just south, the Arch of Galerius stands proud, celebrating the eponymous Roman emperor's victories, immortalised in marble.

THE ASCETIC VLATODON MONASTERY CONTAINS JEWEL-HUED FRESCOES

25 BUDAPEST

Hungary's capital is a tale of two cities on the Danube

Divided by the Danube River, but connected by a 19th-century chain bridge that joins the districts Buda and Pest, the Hungarian capital is a safe, tourist-friendly destination. This grand city has something to offer everyone, from dramatic history and dazzling architecture to healing thermal waters and tasty food.

The absolute go-to attraction for all who venture to Budapest is Castle Hill, a one-kilometre-long limestone plateau towering 170 metres above the Danube. It contains some of the city's most important Medieval monuments and museums, and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Castle Hill can be accessed by a number of local buses, but if you're willing to queue, you can take the famous funicular railway from the Pest side of the Széchenyi Chain Bridge.

A hop-on hop-off bus tour is one of the easiest ways to get around the city. You can often purchase a 24-, 48- or 72-hour ticket, then explore the city at your own pace. It's a tour that we'd recommend if you'd like to be whisked around the city while learning about Budapest's history. The buses stop at many of the top tourist sites in Budapest, including Heroes' Square, the gorgeous Hungarian Parliament Building, Saint Stephen's Basilica, and the Hungarian State Opera House.

The city sits on a series of 125 thermal springs, and enjoying the healing water has been part of the everyday life of locals since togas were all the rage. Seek out the baths for an enjoyable experience, and to relieve whatever ails you with a soak in their mineral-rich waters. Most of them offer a range of serious medical treatments as well as more indulgent services like massages, beauty treatments, pedicures and even the intriguing red-wine bath. Having said that, if you do visit the baths, be sure to look at the opening times ahead of time as they often have a variety of sessions – like mixed or single sex – and you should consider taking flip flops or plastic sandals with you as the floors can become very slippery.

Public transport in Budapest is free to European Union citizens over the age of 65, along with the whole Hungarian railway network. Museums and other tourist attractions have discounted prices for seniors, but you'll probably have to take your passport or ID card with you.

The Széchenyi Medicinal Baths have indoor and outdoor pools to swim in

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Enjoy a warm bowl of goulash at Vörösmarty Tér, the city's main square.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May, September and October (to avoid the heat and summer tourists)

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY
Ft
HUNGARIAN FORINT

USEFUL SITES

budapestinfo.hu
visitbudapest.travel
budapest.com/

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Much of the beautiful city can be easily explored on foot, but watch out for cobbles. It's also advisable to take a shuttle bus up to Castle Hill.

Public transport - Public transport in Budapest is free to EU citizens over the age of 65. For everyone else, the Budapest Card gives you unlimited travel on buses, trams, metro lines and boats within the city limits.

FIND OUT MORE

welovebudapest.com/en/toplists/accessible-budapest-how-to-enjoy-the-city-with-limited-mobility/

THE AMERICAS

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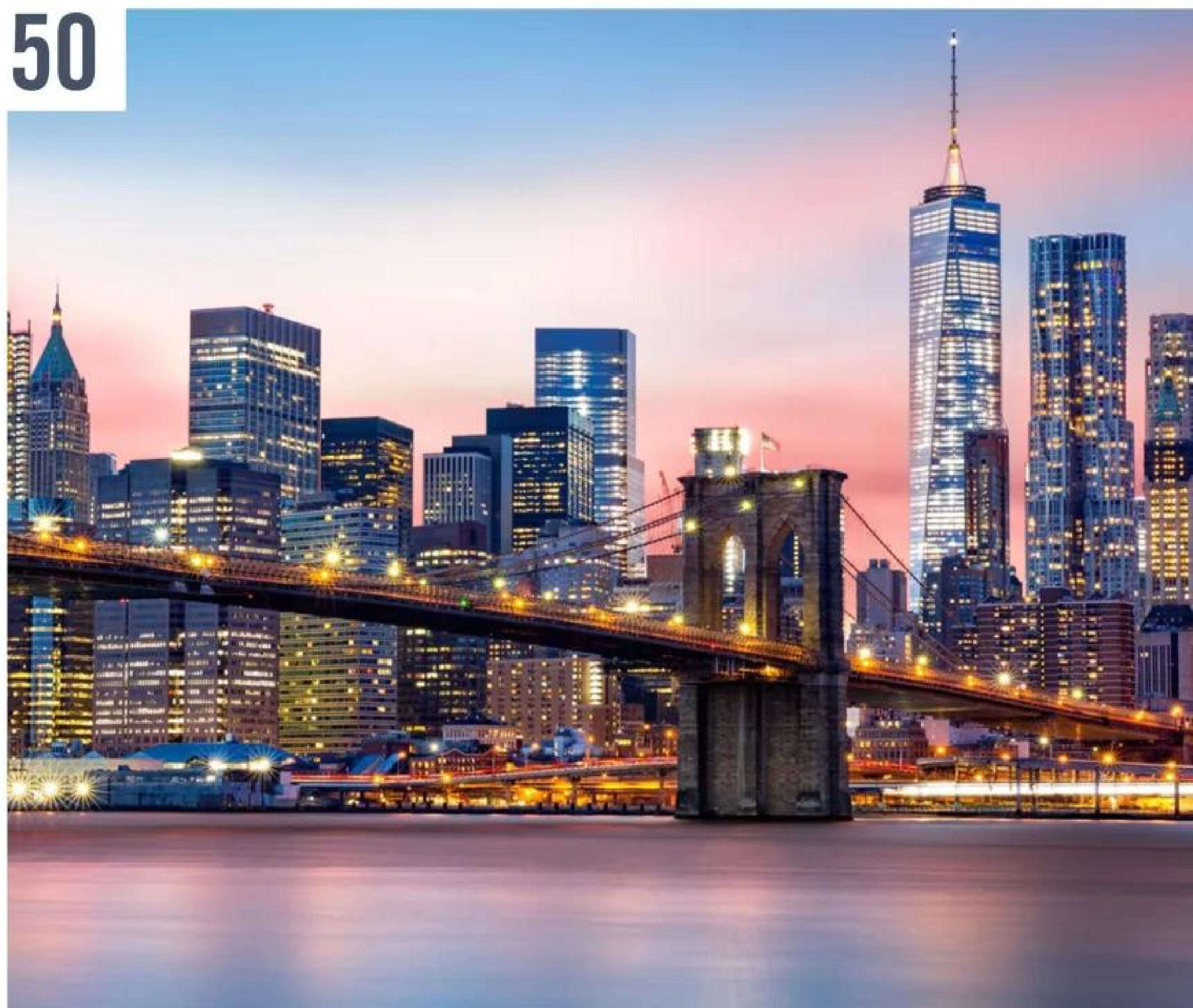


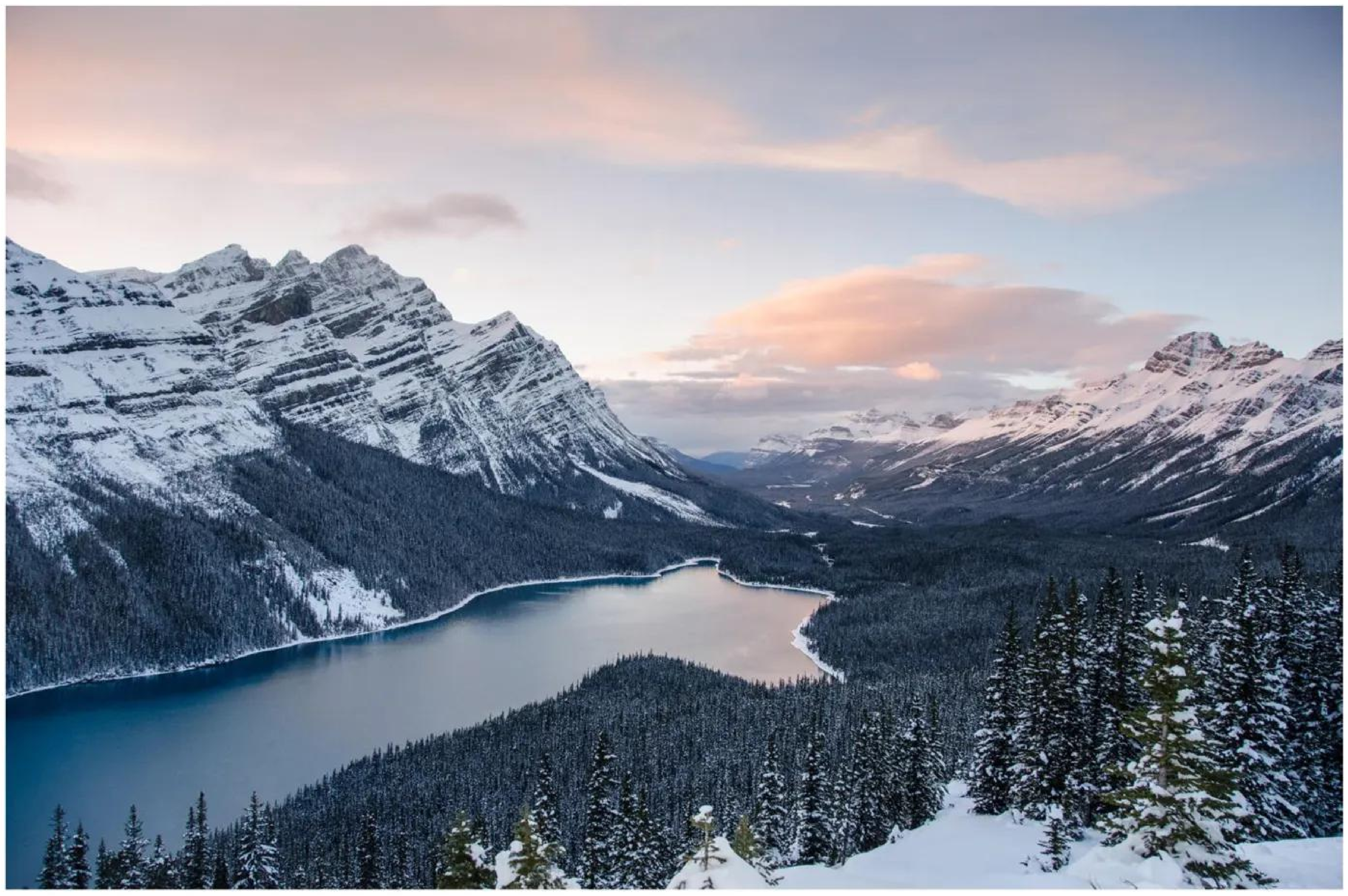
26 BANFF AND LAKE LOUISE

Experience a true Canadian adventure in this picturesque Rockies town

Set off on a Canadian adventure and head straight for Banff – you won't be disappointed. This stunning resort town, situated in Alberta, offers everything from skiing and hiking to tasty food and hot springs. Whether you go in the summer or winter, there will be a plethora of activities for you and your travel buddies.

The historic town of Banff is surrounded by a stunning backdrop of rugged mountains, and the downtown streets are lined with top-class restaurants, bars, shops, museums and art galleries – on the chilled days that you want to spend in the town, you won't be short of things to do. When the tourist town was built, Banff National Park's first superintendent purposefully arranged the town's first street so that it gave the best possible view of Cascade Mountain. The town is quite small, so getting around on foot is easy. Make sure you head to Banff Avenue or Bear Street in order to pick up a souvenir or two from one of the shops – maple chocolates are particularly tasty.

In the winter, the streets will be lined with snow, and Banff town is the perfect base for those on a skiing holiday. Nearby there are three accessible world-class ski resorts to choose from, which can be accessed via car or a regularly scheduled bus service. The mountains here offer a variety of terrains that will suit every level of skier or snowboarder, and you'll find some of the fluffiest and lightweight powder here. The skiing season is long and typically lasts from mid-November until late-May, so there's plenty of time to get your ski on. The ski resorts include Mount Norquay, the Lake Louise Ski Resort, and Sunshine Village.



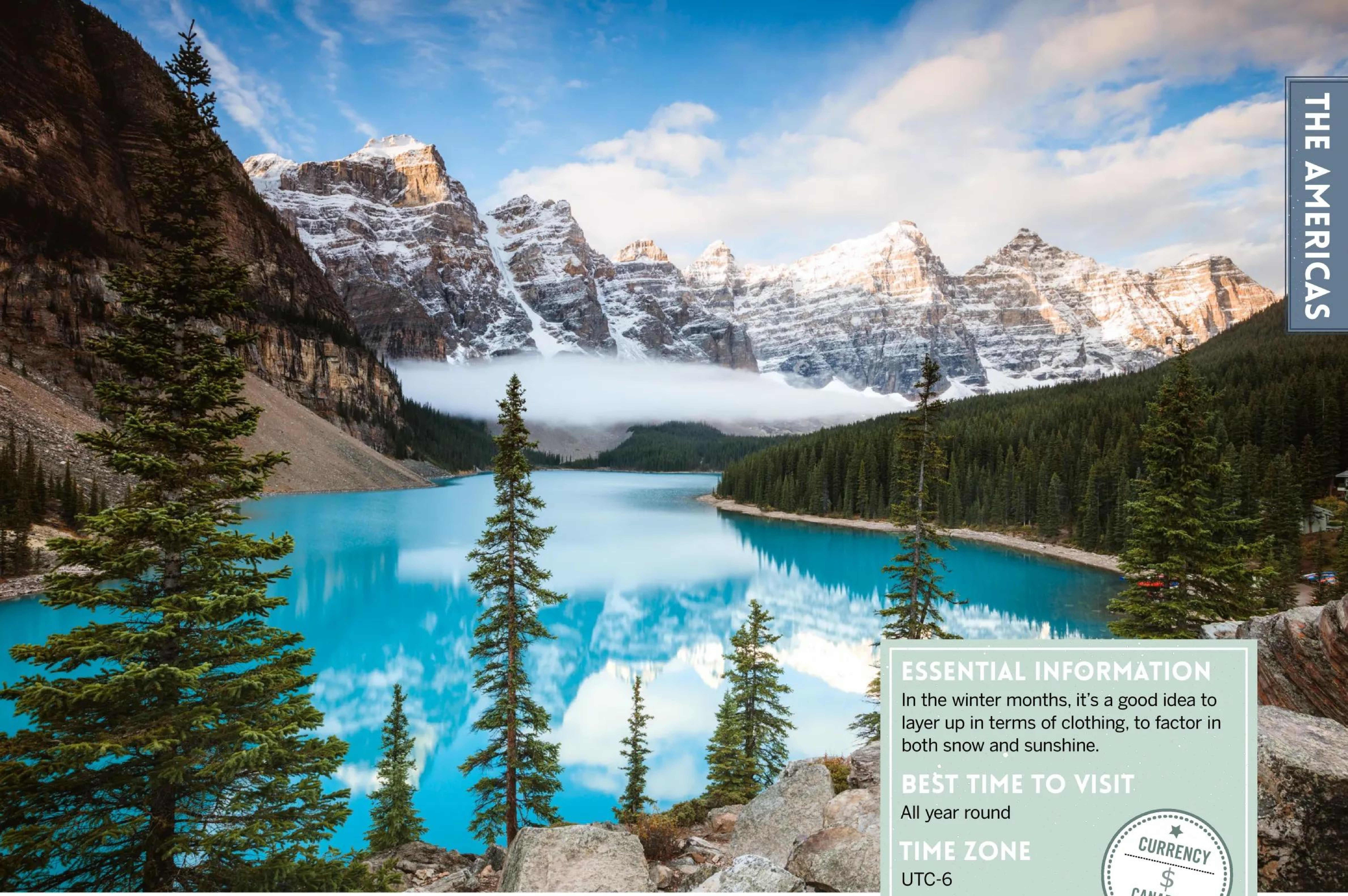
EXPLORE BANFF NATIONAL PARK WITH SOME CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

One of the best things about staying in this area is that you can buy one lift pass – SkiBig3 ticket – that enables you to go to all three main resorts and mountains, as well as free transportation to the ski areas from town. This handy pass gives you unlimited skiing on the mountains, complimentary access to the Banff Hot Springs, and admission to the Whyte Museum, as well as welcome discounts on a range of activities and in restaurants.

If tumbling down a mountain isn't really your thing, or you'd like to add a bit of variety to your trip, explore Banff National Park with some cross-country skiing. It's a great way to explore the area in the winter months, and there are a number of trails that will suit different fitness

Mount Rundle and the Banff Hoodoos in late afternoon

Why not try your hand at ice climbing at the Johnston Canyon?



levels. There's also the option of snowshoeing, ice-skating or regular hiking for exploring the area, and you can rent snowshoes or winter boots from Bactrax.

There are a number of organised tours operated from the resort town as well, including a dog-sled tour. Learn the history of dog sledding in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, and you'll also get a change to meet the trainers and dogs themselves. For more of an adrenaline rush, you can also head off on an ice-climbing adventure or partake in some crazy heli-skiing.

The resort of Banff isn't just for winter-sports enthusiasts – there is plenty on offer in the summer months too. Hiking is a popular pastime in this area thanks to the incredible scenery. Head off for an early-morning hike and admire the peace and quiet – setting off for an early-morning hike is probably the best way to truly enjoy the most popular routes: Tunnel Mountain, Johnston Canyon and the Tea House Hikes. For a real buzz, consider heli-hiking, where you will be choppered up to stunning locations miles from your average hikers and dropped off to explore the less-explored parts. If you are new to hiking or just want a bit more information about the area's history, there are a number of guided hikes that you can sign up to in town.

In the summer months, biking is a great way to explore the area. From road cycling on the Bow Valley Highway towards Lake Louise or speeding down mountain-biking tracks to cruising along the Banff Legacy Trail, there's an adventure for every cycling level.

Before the water freezes solid in the winter, enjoy one of a number of water-based activities to cool off during the summer. The lakes and rivers in Banff National Park will either offer you peace, calm and tranquillity or exhilarating adventure. Hop in a canoe or kayak, or aboard a paddleboard or raft and get on the water. Bow River is accessible from downtown Banff, and you can rent a canoe or kayak by the hour or day. Within minutes of setting off you'll be surrounded by impressive scenery and mountain vistas.

Explore the mountains without having to ski down them and get a gondola up to the top of Sulphur Mountain. Named after its odorous sulphurous hot springs found on the lower slopes, you'll be amazed by the incredible view of the surrounding area that this mountain offers. The Banff gondola is open all year, and the easy eight-minute ride will take you to the summit at 2,281 metres (7,484 feet). On the summit ridge you'll find restaurants, observation decks and interpretive boardwalks – make sure that you take your camera because the view is truly breathtaking.

One of the most popular sights in Banff National Park is Johnston Canyon. It is a must-see natural attraction, with intimidating canyon walls, waterfalls, deep pools and lush forests. In the spring, summer and autumn it is a stunning place to take a walk and enjoy the deep-blue creek, then in the winter it transforms into a popular place for ice-climbing and ice walking.

If you get all adventured out, you might want some relaxation time to end your trip, so head to one of the town's many spas. Or go to Banff National Park's hot springs at any time of year – locals recommend a morning visit for the most relaxation and the crispest air.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

In the winter months, it's a good idea to layer up in terms of clothing, to factor in both snow and sunshine.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

All year round

TIME ZONE

UTC-6

CURRENCY
$
CANADIAN DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

banfflakelouise.com
snowtips-bactrax.com/Other_Winter_Equipment.html

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Generally, the viewpoints are wheelchair friendly. The outdoor summit platform, with views of the Rocky Mountains, is also completely accessible.

Public transport - Wheelchair-accessible buses link Banff and Lake Louise (Route 8X) and the Banff Gondola is a great excursion for all the family.

FIND OUT MORE

banfflakelouise.com/accessibility

27 LAS VEGAS

Las Vegas shines bright, but it's more than lights that make Sin City stand out

Bright neon signs, flashy casinos and getting hitched in front of Elvis. Mention Las Vegas and these are probably the first things that spring to mind. And yes, it is all of these things; the city really does dazzle. According to NASA, if you're looking down at Earth from space, it's the brightest location on the planet. Because of its reputation, most people either love or hate the idea of visiting, but it should definitely be on your bucket list because, whoever you are, this surprising ray of light has something for you.

Vegas really is unlike anywhere else. The six-kilometre (four-mile) stretch down Las Vegas Boulevard, known as the 'Strip', is lined with some of the biggest hotels in the world; it's as if you've landed in a glamorous theme park that takes you around the globe. Take a trip to Venice at The Venetian, gliding down the canal on a gondola past old Italian villas, or see the Statue of Liberty at New York, New York. The 30-storey pyramid at the Luxor will transport you to Ancient Egypt, while at the Paris Las Vegas Hotel (a few steps down the road) you can sit at a café with a view of the Eiffel Tower. From the dancing fountains at the Bellagio to the iconic Vegas sign, the sights and attractions are jaw-dropping.

Vegas truly is a world of glitz and glamour. With more than 40 million visitors a year, the city has earned its title as the entertainment and gambling capital of the world. It has some of the biggest casinos and nightclubs. The largest of these, Sunset Station Hotel and Casino, is located off the strip, but other popular hotels for gambling include the Wynn and the Venetian. If you like slot machines, head to the ARIA; for table games the Golden Nugget has the most choice; and if you're not a gambler try LEVEL UP, the gaming lounge at the MGM Grand.

If you'd rather dance the night away, there's more than enough choice. See world-famous DJs at Hakkasan, one of the world's biggest nightclubs, or indulge in opulence at the Wynn's XS Nightclub.

If you want to enjoy a drink in a more intimate and classy setting, the bars are just as exceptional. For sheer luxury, visit Chandelier at the Cosmopolitan where you can order a cocktail under a giant chandelier made from two million crystals, or relax at the lavish Vesper Bar, which is decked out in chrome and mirror tiles. For breathtaking views of the city, check out the bar at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel.

The city is also known for its wild pool parties. The Rehab Beach Club at the Hard Rock Hotel is where it all started, but again the choice is huge with epic pool parties like Wet Republic at the MGM Grand and Mandalay Bay. But you don't have to party to get a wild water experience –

WELCOME
TO Fabulous
LAS VEGAS
NEVADA

A visit to Vegas wouldn't be complete without a trip to the iconic Vegas sign

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

UK citizens must apply for an ESTA (Electronic System for Travel Authorization) to visit the US.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May and September to November

TIME ZONE

UTC-7

CURRENCY
$
US DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

cirquedusoleil.com/las-vegas
vegas.com/tours
nocovernightclubs.com/nightclubs

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The Strip is mostly flat and has a few escalator bridges (with elevator access) connecting both sides of the boulevard.

Public transport - Ride sharing providers, taxis, the monorail and wheelchair accessible public buses provide transport around the city.

FIND OUT MORE

travelpros.visitlasvegas.com/travel-professionals/agent-tools/special-needs-visitors

Take a trip in a gondola and experience a taste of Italy at The Venetian

The Las Vegas skyline is definitely worth seeing at night

DOWNTOWN IS THE HISTORIC HEART OF THE CITY

simply visit the Golden Nugget's pool, where you can waterslide through a shark tank.

But entertainment doesn't stop there. Some of the world's best musical artists hold regular shows, and don't miss Cirque du Soleil's 'O', the water-based spectacular at the Mirage.

Despite its reputation, Vegas actually has a great deal of history. Downtown is the historic heart of the city where you'll find the Golden Nugget, one of the city's oldest casinos, the Neon Museum and the Mob Museum, which takes you back to a time when gangsters ran the casinos. These are highly recommended as they highlight just how far Las Vegas has come: from the desert home of Native Americans to the fastest growing city in the US.

Visitors can take a short drive to one of the seven wonders of the engineering world – Hoover Dam – and see Lake Mead, the nation's largest reservoir. Hoover Dam is steeped in history. It was built in 1935 after gambling was legalised, giving the city the power to light up the casinos, which were run by the mob.

If you want to explore other areas of natural beauty, Red Rock Canyon is only 20 minutes away, and the south rim of the Grand Canyon is a five-hour drive.

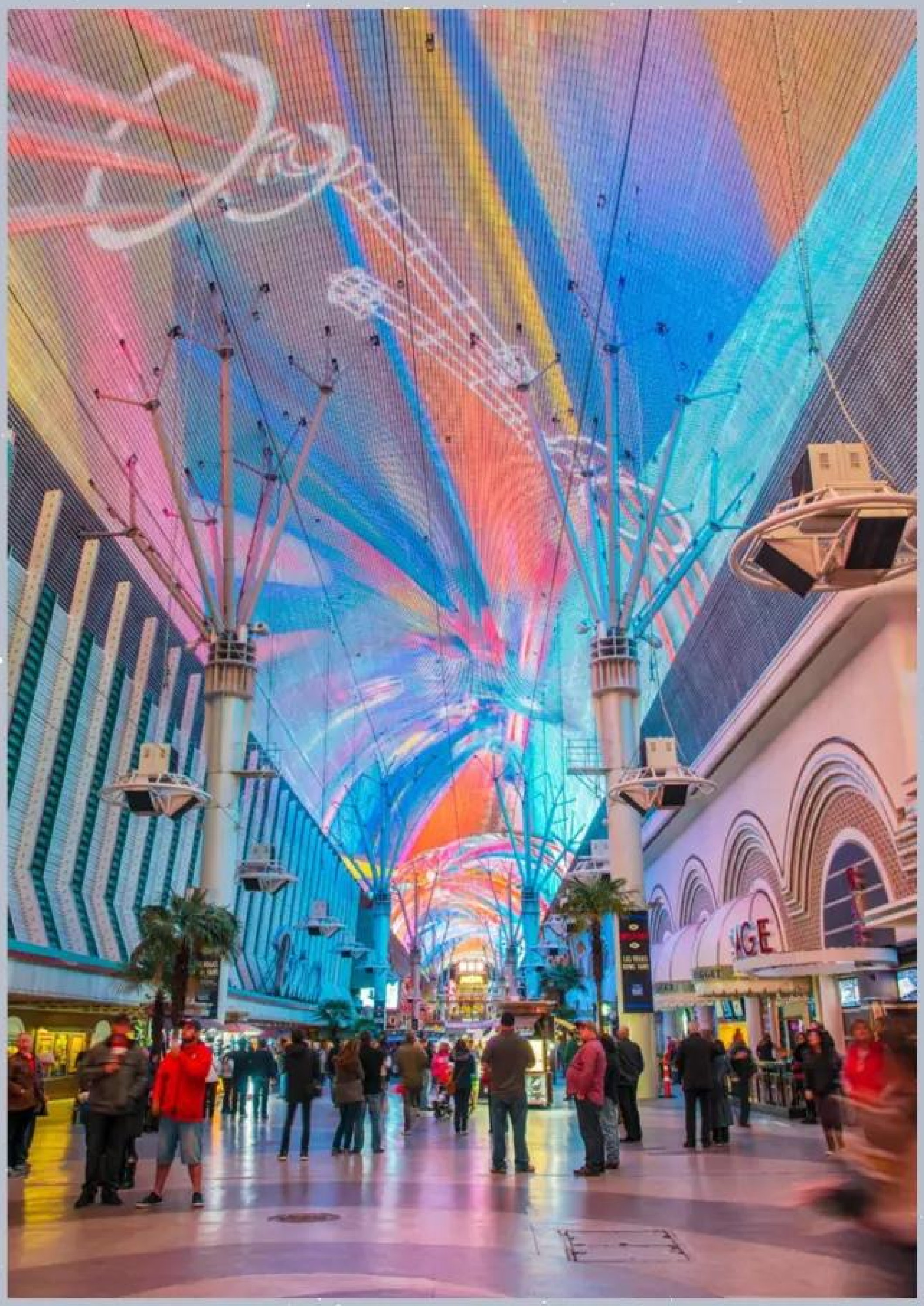
You wouldn't think to mention Vegas as a top food destination, but it is. You can find food from every culture, from pizza and sushi to tacos and steak. You can't go to Vegas without having a steak. Try SW Steakhouse, one of only three restaurants in the US that serves authentic Kobe beef. Vegas is known for its huge buffets, as this was a way to keep gamblers in the casinos by providing large quantities of cheap food. With more than 70 buffets it'll be hard to choose one, but the Baccanal Buffet at Caesar's Palace is highly ranked. The city is also famous for its brunches – make sure you go to Hash House a Go Go. If you've got cash to splash, the city has the highest volume of restaurants run by celebrated chefs, and is becoming known for its fine-dining. If you can only treat yourself once, taste 'Chef of the Century' Joel Robuchon's food at MGM Grand.

Adrenaline junkies will have lots to keep them busy. Jump off the 108th floor of the Stratosphere hotel at SkyJump or, if rollercoasters are more your thing, the Canyon Blaster at Circus Circus is the world's only indoor double loop, double corkscrew. There's also the Manhattan Express at New York, New York and Desperado at Buffalo Bill's. Adventurers can go indoor skydiving, mountain biking and much more along the Strip and further afield. Sports fanatics can bet at Caesar's Palace or play golf at championship golf courses including Bali Hai Golf Club.

Shop in style at some stunning shopping venues, from the Forum shops at Greco-Roman themed Caesar's Palace to the Grand Canal Shoppes at The Venetian. For luxury shopping take a trip to Crystals at CityCentre; for popular brands there are more than 200 stores at the Fashion Show Mall; and if you're after a discount try the Las Vegas North Premium Outlets.

Vegas also has some of the best spas in the world. Be pampered like a queen with a euphoric synchronised massage at Encore, a gemstone facial at ARIA or skin treatment using 24-carat gold at Qua Baths & Spa.

They say that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, and whether you get up to mischief or not, there's at least one reason that you should stay in Vegas and just see what happens.



FAMILY FUN

Despite its reputation, Vegas is not just for late-night revellers. There's plenty to keep the whole family entertained. If the kids want a bit of excitement, the Adventure Dome Theme Park at Circus Circus and the High Roller Observation Wheel are great fun. For something extra-special, visit Fremont Street to zipline through the indoor mall or see the Viva vision light and music show. For animal lovers, try Shark Reef Aquarium or Siegfried & Roy's Secret Garden And Dolphin Habitat. The hotels also provide plenty of child-friendly entertainment from Bellagio's Conservation and Botanical Gardens to the Tournament of Kings at the medieval-themed Excalibur Hotel. Let them play in a treehouse at the Downtown Container or channel their inner superheroes at the Avengers STATION Museum. If your youngsters have a sweet tooth, take them to Hershey's Chocolate or M&M World. The fun is endless.

28 GRAND CANYON

Marvel at the beauty of this natural slice through southwest USA

Surprisingly, the Grand Canyon doesn't set many records. It isn't the longest, nor the widest, not even the deepest. However, it is by far the most famous, so much so that many people simply call it The Canyon as though there were no others in the world.

Multicoloured layers of rock sink into the earth, forming a chasm that gives the impression it must have been created by tectonic plates tearing apart. However, this slice through the United States was created over several million years – geologists still argue exactly how long ago – when the Colorado River meandered across what is now north Arizona. Erosion from the flowing water combined with the uplift of the Colorado Plateau to carve a mile-deep canyon. The rocks that are left behind were once covered by the waters of a warm, shallow sea or swampland, but now shimmer under the sun in a hot, dry desert.

For those interested in the statistics, the Grand Canyon stretches for 446 kilometres (277 miles), reaches 29 kilometres (18 miles) at its widest and measures 1,857 metres (6,093 feet) at its deepest. Nobody will ever see the whole thing in one visit, but it is possible to take in the majesty and grandeur in a day or two.

The popular sites of the South Rim may be busy, but they draw the crowds for a reason. Grand Canyon Village, with a number of wooden buildings dating to the turn of the 20th century, gives a glimpse of canyon country in the final days of the American Frontier. From here, Hermit Road runs west for 11 kilometres (eight miles) to the stone-built Hermit's Rest. Those who are keen to hike a portion of the Canyon will find this the easiest way to get their boots dusty: jump on board the free shuttle bus to Hermit's Rest and walk back to Grand Canyon Village along the Rim Trail. For those who prefer to see their natural wonders from the comfort of a seat, hop on and off the buses to your heart's content at the designated stops and viewpoints along the road.

The quieter Desert View Drive, heading east from Grand Canyon Village, is the best way to escape the tourist hordes. This 40-kilometre (25-mile) road does not have a shuttle bus service so relies on visitors having their own wheels, but it includes six viewpoints and five unmarked pullover points. Don't miss Navajo Point and Lipan Point, two places where the dusky red layers of rock can be seen at their best. The road ends at the Desert View Watchtower, just beyond the stunning Tusayan Ruins. These are the eerie remains of a Puebloan village, first constructed nearly 1,000 years ago by around 20 Native Americans who called this land home.

Coachloads of tourists go no further than the viewpoints of the South Rim, but it's difficult to look down the steep walls of the Grand Canyon and not wonder what is down there. Bright Angel Trail, beginning in Grand Canyon Village, drops 1,340 metres (4,380 feet) over 13 kilometres (eight miles) to the banks of the Colorado River at the bottom of the cliffs. Given the nature of the descent, expect seemingly endless switchbacks and aching knees, although at least it's only another three kilometres (two miles) to the comfortable beds at Phantom Ranch, the only lodge beyond the rim.

Only 16 kilometres (ten miles) from Grand Canyon Village as the crow flies, but a five-hour drive around the gorge, North Rim is the quieter (and less accessble) side of Grand Canyon with only ten per cent of the park's visitors venturing across. It makes it the ideal place to seek sanctuary from the crowds. The north is also the colder side since it is around 300 metres (1,000 feet) higher than the South Rim. While those on the North Rim can be stood in falling snow, others far below might be sunbathing along the river bank.

The multicoloured layers of the Grand Canyon rock strata plunge downwards for over 1.6km (1mi)

THE NORTH RIM IS THE IDEAL PLACE TO SEEK SANCTUARY FROM THE CROWDS

The Desert View Watchtower is one of the best places to escape the crowds on South Rim

It is now 150 years since John Wesley Powell led the first expedition through Grand Canyon in 1869 to explore an unknown section on American maps. Those who want to follow the trailblazing path of the pioneers should join one of the waterborne excursions leaving Lee's Ferry in the summer months. Itineraries range from a few days to a few weeks, and you can experience the Colorado River by whitewater rafting through rapids, peaceful paddling up little-known side canyons, and exploring Native American ruins only accessible by river.

But perhaps the best way to really appreciate the scale of the Grand Canyon is from the

RIM TO RIM

It's possible to take a number of different rim-to-rim hikes across the Grand Canyon, although it is not recommended to try it in a single day. Probably the best option is the 39-kilometre (24-mile) route along the Bright Angel and North Kaibab trails from Grand Canyon Village on South Rim to Grand Canyon Lodge on North Rim. The walk is breathtaking in every sense, but worth it. Alternatively, try the shorter (but still challenging) South Rim to South Rim trek along the South Kaibab trail to the river and back up along the Bright Angel. Whichever way you go, keep an eye out for the rare California condor soaring high on the thermals. However, beware the weather. Hikers who leave the clifftops in the cold light of an icy dawn may be wearing thick coats, only to find themselves sweltering in dangerously high temperatures when they reach the bottom of the Canyon.

The Colorado River carved the steep cliffs of the Grand Canyon over millions of years

air. Scenic flights by helicopter and aeroplane leave from Grand Canyon Airport on South Rim, while others depart from Las Vegas, enabling visitors to Sin City to glimpse the Grand Canyon between trips to the gaming tables. Passengers who are lucky enough to find themselves on board are able to marvel at the sheer immensity of the gorge, carved by the seemingly peaceful ribbon of river within it.

To limit noise and ensure passenger safety, the National Park Service limits the number of flights and no longer allows them to dip below the rim. However, some helicopter excursions do land within the Canyon on the Havasupai and Hualapai Reservations, located outside National Park jurisdiction.

The Havasupai portion of the Canyon is home to the spectacular waterfalls of Havasu Creek, a tributary of the Colorado. For sheer beauty, this is one of the finest places in the region. The star attraction of the Hualapai Reservation is the Grand Canyon Skywalk, a glass-bottomed, horseshoe-shaped walkway that extends 21 metres (70 feet) over the rim. It may not be a comfortable experience for those who are afraid of heights, but the makers claim it will hold the weight of 70 Boeing 747 aeroplanes. Although if the glass did smash, expect a long fall – all those jets could all sit on top of each other and still not reach the rim, such is the depth of the most famous canyon in the world.

Hiking trails run along the rims and down the steep sides of the Canyon

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Although South Rim is open all year round, be aware that North Rim closes during the winter months.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to October

TIME ZONE

UTC-7

CURRENCY

$ US DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

nps.gov/grca
grandcanyon.com
explorethecanyon.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Many trails around the park have uneven terrain on dirt tracks, but some parts are wheelchair accessible. Traveling down into the Canyon will naturally involve inclines.

Public transport - The South Rim can be accessed from Flagstaff, which can be reached by plane, train and bus. Free shuttle buses within the park are wheelchair accessible.

FIND OUT MORE

nps.gov/grca/planyourvisit/accessibility.htm

29 NIAGARA FALLS

Experience awesome power at North America's iconic natural water feature

There are few international borders as impressive as this one. Niagara Falls marks the boundary between the American state of New York and the Canadian province of Ontario – at least, partly. Niagara Falls is actually three distinct waterfalls: Horseshoe Falls bisects the USA-Canada border, while American Falls and the much smaller Bridal Veil Falls lie entirely on the United States' side. The three waterfalls, with Goat Island and Luna Island separating them, all lie in the Niagara River. Unlike elsewhere on the border, here anything to the west of the river is Canada and anything to the east is the United States.

On average, 2,400 cubic metres of water flows over Horseshoe Falls – the biggest of the three – every second. However, that figure varies depending on the season and the time of day. In late spring and early summer, when Lake Erie is at its highest, water flow reaches a peak – the maximum ever recorded was 6,400 cubic metres every second. During the winter and at night, when water is diverted to hydroelectric power plants, the flow may drop as low as 1,400 cubic metres per second.

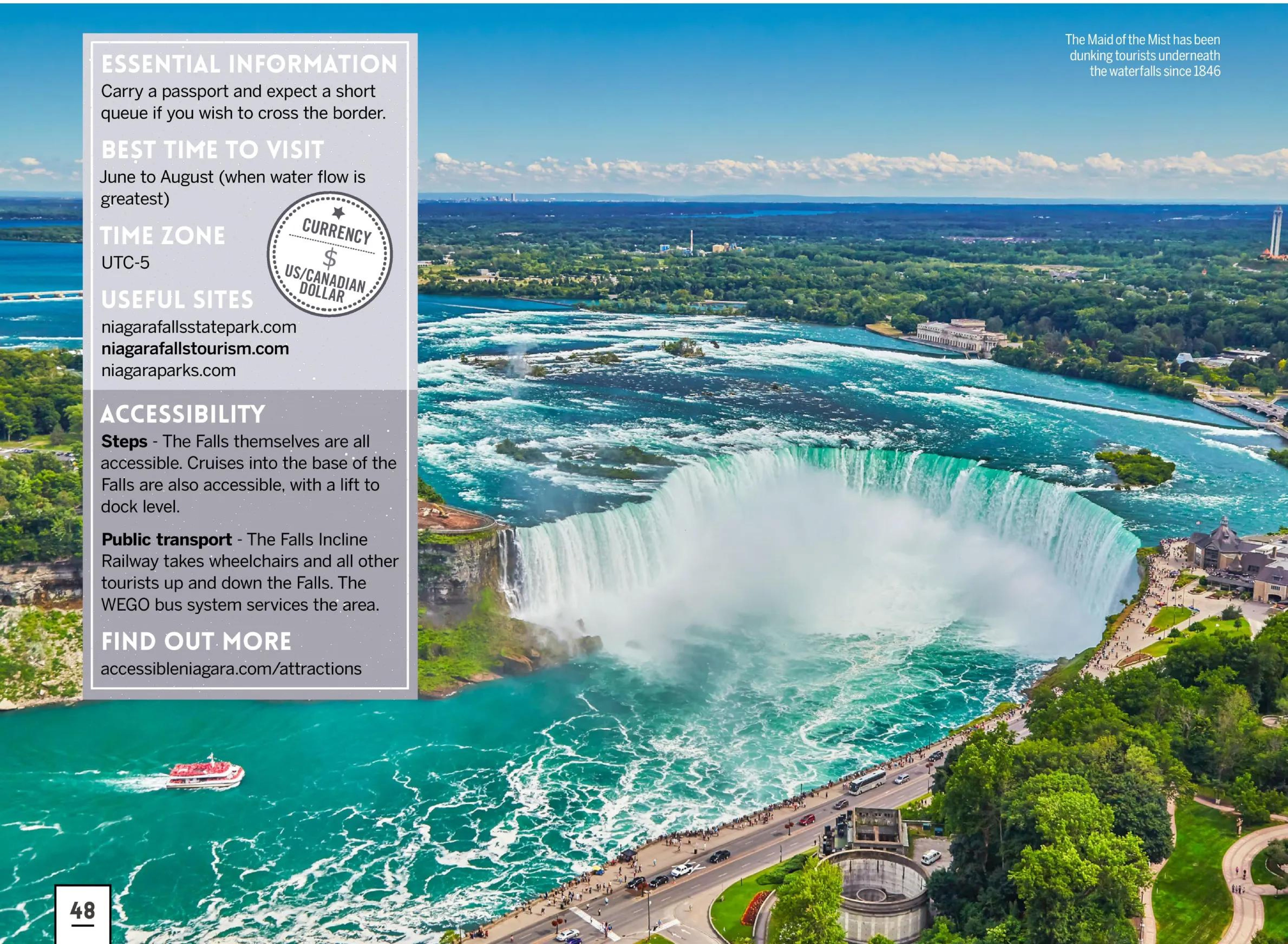
It's no surprise that visitor numbers peak in the summer months too, flooding to walkways along Prospect Point Park with cameras clicking in an attempt to capture the majestic sight of water cascading over the precipice in front of them – don't forget to take a long-exposure shot for a silky-smooth waterscape. Goat Island offers more excellent views of the falls and is accessible by foot and car by a bridge over American Falls.

Try to take a trip on the Maid of the Mist – a 20-minute boat cruise that has carried passengers into the rapids immediately below the falls since 1846. The plastic ponchos provided by the crew are a must, since the boat's name is very apt (you can expect to get thoroughly covered in the spray from the falls), but there is truly no better way to experience the 51-metre (167-foot) height of Horseshoe Falls than bobbing at the bottom and looking up at the wall of water tumbling towards you.

The other side of the river offers the opposite perspective. The Skylon Tower, in the Canadian town of Niagara Falls, rises 158 metres (518 feet) above the ground, and looks over the waterfall drop. Take in the view from the observation platform or enjoy a slow lunch or dinner in one of two restaurants as the room slowly rotates.

That's the viewpoints from the front, above and below sorted, but what about from behind? The Journey Behind the Falls attraction allows people to enter a series of remarkable tunnels dug into the rock and peer at the waterfalls from sheltered cave entrances that open out onto the falls. Again, expect to get wet!

With several other ways to gain a new perspective on the falls – helicopter, skywheel or zipwire – Niagara Falls caters for every kind of adventurous visitor. Just don't expect to follow in the footsteps of Charles Blondin, who liked to walk across the waterfalls on a tightrope in the 1850s, once even stopping to cook and eat an omelette in the middle!



The Maid of the Mist has been dunking tourists underneath the waterfalls since 1846

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Carry a passport and expect a short queue if you wish to cross the border.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to August (when water flow is greatest)

TIME ZONE

UTC-5

CURRENCY
$
US/CANADIAN DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

niagarafallsstatepark.com
niagarafallstourism.com
niagaraparks.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The Falls themselves are all accessible. Cruises into the base of the Falls are also accessible, with a lift to dock level.

Public transport - The Falls Incline Railway takes wheelchairs and all other tourists up and down the Falls. The WEGO bus system services the area.

FIND OUT MORE

accessibleniagara.com/attractions

Denali – formerly named Mount McKinley – is the tallest mountain in North America

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Plan for an hour's wait for a shuttle bus with space available when needing a roadside pick up.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to September (to avoid road closures due to snow)

TIME ZONE

UTC-9

CURRENCY

$ US DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

nps.gov/dena
reservedenali.com
denaliparkvillage.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The terrain can be steep here. Gradients and surface conditions of the trails and camps are helpfully described on the PBS website.

Public transport - The first 24 kilometres (15 miles) of road in the park is open to all vehicles, but beyond that, you'll have to take a tour bus.

FIND OUT MORE

nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/accessibility.htm

30 DENALI NATIONAL PARK

Explore the rugged wilderness of the USA's frozen north

The home of the tallest mountain in North America, Denali National Park – named after the 6,190-metre (20,310-foot) peak – is a semi-Arctic wilderness roughly the same size as the entire land area of Massachusetts. Visitors with keen eyes are likely to see grizzly bears, caribou and moose. Those with luck on their side might spot the evasive wolves, black bears and wolverines.

Considering its vast size, almost 20,000 square kilometres (7,700 square miles), Denali National Park contains only one road with a handful of destinations marked by mileposts. Private motorists can go as far as the Savage River Trailhead at mile 15 before being turned around by the National Park Service, but most visitors stop at the Wilderness Access Center at the start of the road to buy a ticket for the official buses that travel its full 146-kilometre (91-mile) length. Tour buses offer a guaranteed seat and a set itinerary, whereas shuttle buses will stop on request to set down and pick up passengers at the side of the road. Many of the shuttle-bus drivers are just as happy to share their love of the national park as their tour-bus equivalents, although prospective passengers may have to be patient until a bus with space aboard arrives, as they can be very busy.

All should aim to make it as far as Eielson Visitor Center at mile 66. This eight-hour round trip on the unpaved road might be tough on the buttocks, but it includes one of the most dramatic views of Denali. Even if the mountain is shrouded in cloud – a common occurrence during the summer months – it is a majestic sight. If the mountain is fully out, take full advantage and go crazy with your camera.

Photographers with a little more stamina might like to extend their journey to mile 86 and Wonder Lake. A short distance away is Reflection Pond, which is possibly the best place to shoot images of the mountain when it peeks out from the mist. A little closer to home, at mile 46, is Polychrome Pass. This multicoloured bluff is particularly spectacular at dusk, and a dedicated shuttle bus departs the Visitor Center daily at around 5pm.

If the thought of a day on a bus seat doesn't appeal, why not step off the bus and into the wilderness? There are surprisingly few marked trails, so most hikers simply pick their own path. The sparse vegetation of the flat tundra and taiga forest makes it difficult to get lost, although those who choose to push further into the park may go for hours, even days, without seeing another person. There are campsites and lodges to rest at night, although be sure to book a spot at the Wilderness Access Center beforehand since spaces fill up quickly. Ensure you take plenty of supplies with you, as there are few services within the park itself.

Whether you choose off-road adventure in the backcountry or the comparative comfort of on-road travel, you'll be left with memories and photographs galore of the stunning scenery and wondrous wildlife of Denali National Park.

31 NEW YORK CITY

There's nowhere like New York, America's epicentre of culture and commerce

Welcome to the city that never sleeps. New York is a vast metropolis where anything can happen – one minute you're taking in the neon-lit commercial mecca of Times Square, the next you'll be sipping drinks in a trendy Brooklyn dive bar or strolling through acres of urban greenery in the iconic surrounds of Central Park.

However you choose to begin your New York City adventure, arriving into town via Grand Central Terminal will ensure a suitably splendid entrance. The aptly named station (it's both grand and central) houses elaborate architecture and artwork, providing its 700,000 daily commuters with an inspiring start and end to their journeys.

Manhattan is New York City how you imagine it. Most of the Big Apple's recognisable sites can be found here, including the Empire State Building. This towering landmark and its dazzling coloured lights can, of course, be enjoyed from the ground for free – but seeing the city from its 102nd floor observatory is an essential NYC experience.

From up here you can map out the city just as the birds do, planning your route through its varied neighbourhoods while basking in the glow of a Manhattan sunset (it's the best time to visit, as you'll see the city transitioning from day to night). For the best view of the Empire State Building itself, try Top of the Rock at the Rockefeller Center, which is located directly opposite the Empire State Building and provides similarly spellbinding vistas of the city. In winter, there's also an iconic ice rink at its feet.

Continue to find your bearings with a walk along the High Line park. What used to be an unsightly freight line through the Meatpacking District has become one of New York's most appealing urban spaces – a 2.4-kilometre (1.5-mile) stretch of green where you can take your time ambling across the city and admiring its sights from nine metres (30 feet) above the ground. Art installations, food vendors and some inspired landscaping make it easy to spend an afternoon enjoying views of the Hudson River.

When you're done with the razzle-dazzle of Manhattan, New York has four other boroughs to explore. Brooklyn is big enough to be its own city – accessible by foot via the stately Brooklyn Bridge – and it's where you'll find independent shops and bars in the hip neighbourhood of Williamsburg, kitsch coastal amusements in Coney Island, and verdant foliage in Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Sports fans will want to spend some time in Queens and the Bronx, home to two of America's most legendary baseball teams. The Mets play at Citi Field in Queens, while the Yankees hit their home runs from Yankee Stadium in the Bronx. If you'd prefer to catch some fast-paced basketball, head to Madison Square Garden, where the Knicks shoot some impressive hoops.

Taking the free ferry to Staten Island means you'll catch sight of New York's most recognisable landmark. The Statue of Liberty holds her torch aloft from her pedestal on Liberty Island, visible from the boat. For a closer look, take a trip to the island and enjoy a self-guided audio tour to learn about the history of this remarkable monument. Book tickets in advance if you want to step inside the statue, and see NYC from Lady Liberty's crown.

Museums in New York provide a cultural antidote to the touristy hubbub of its most famous sights. Perhaps the most noteworthy

The High Line injects nature and colour into the urban heart of New York City

STEP INSIDE THE STATUE AND SEE NEW YORK FROM LADY LIBERTY'S CROWN

New York's iconic yellow 'medallion' taxicabs charge by a meter based on the duration and distance of your journey

CENTRAL PARK

Providing an escape from the bright lights and blaring horns of the big city, Central Park is a 341-hectare (843-acre) oasis that anyone can enjoy. There's no shortage of things to see and do here – whether you're checking out points of interest like Strawberry Fields and Belvedere Castle or kicking back in the expansive communal plains of Sheep Meadow, the park has served as a leisure space for New Yorkers ever since its creation in the 1850s.

Some of the best activities in Central Park include taking in the scenery during a horse-and-carriage ride, and visiting the 130+ species that reside in Central Park Zoo. Depending on when you visit, you might also be able to check out some of the seasonal events that take place in the park each year, such as music concerts in summer and ice skating in winter.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Plan on taking the New York City Subway? Save money on multiple journeys with a reloadable MetroCard.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to June

TIME ZONE

UTC-4

USEFUL SITES

nycgo.com
iloveny.com
loving-newyork.com

CURRENCY
$
US DOLLAR

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The city is mainly flat, and most buildings and attractions have elevators to other levels. Some shops and restaurants may have a few steps from curb to door.

Public transport - Taxis and ride shares are the easiest way to get around. Buses, ferries and the subway are other options, but the latter is not always accessible.

FIND OUT MORE

nycgo.com/plan-your-trip/basic-information/accessibility

You can walk or cycle from Manhattan to Brooklyn via the Brooklyn Bridge

of these is the Metropolitan Museum of Art (known as the Met for short). Countless significant artworks fill the walls and halls of this vast museum, with highlights including a reconstruction of an Ancient Egyptian temple and priceless paintings from around the world. Its roof garden and bar provide the perfect place to relax between exhibitions, and contain sculptures by contemporary artists.

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) houses one of the world's best collections of work by artists including Vincent van Gogh, Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock and Roy Lichtenstein. If you're still craving creative prowess, there's the Guggenheim; the building is a masterpiece in itself, an inverted-ziggurat structure designed by American architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

When you've filled your boots with art, the American Museum of Natural History showcases wonders of an entirely different kind. Kids and adults alike marvel at the feats of evolution inside this temple to Mother Nature, such as a 28.7-metre (94-foot) long blue whale suspended from the ceiling and more dinosaur skeletons than you can shake a prehistoric stick at. Film fans should look out for items featured in the 'Night at the Museum' film series.

A more sobering experience (but no less vital) is to visit the National September 11 Memorial & Museum. Here, a pair of square reflective pools surrounded by America's largest man-made waterfalls mark the precise location where the Twin Towers once stood. Around each pool's edge, the names of the 2,983 victims are inscribed into bronze parapets as a tribute to those who lost their lives.

You'll need to keep your energy levels up with plenty of food while exploring New York's sprawling neighbourhoods. As luck would have it, this city is one of the best places in the world for eating. Whether you choose to dine in style at one of NYC's many Michelin-starred restaurants or keep it real with meals from street vendors, foodies will be in awe of the culinary variety that can be found here.

Pizza is something of a speciality in New York, and there's no shortage of quality outlets to grab a slice from. Some of the best include Grimaldi's in Brooklyn and Lombardi's in Little Italy. You'll also want to grab a bagel while you're in town; for this, try the smoked salmon and cream cheese number at Russ & Daughters. And what would breakfast in New York be without coffee? The city is awash with independent cafés – you'll barely walk two blocks without discovering one.

Don't forget to catch a show on Broadway to finish your day in style, or cruise along the Hudson to see the city of stars come to life.

Manhattan's famous skyscrapers include the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building and One World Trade Center

32 MONTEVERDE

At Costa Rica's 'green mountain' oasis, you'll feel like you're on cloud nine

While Costa Rica may be known for its rich coffee, beautiful beaches and incredible wildlife, you haven't experienced the country's 'pura vida' (pure life and enjoyment) until you've visited Monteverde.

The word Monteverde translates as 'green mountain', a fitting name considering the lush-green cloud forests the town is known for. Located in the northwest of Costa Rica in the Cordillera de Tilaran mountain range, the area has three cloud forests, which offer an experience unlike any other.

The most famous of these is The Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. Established in 1972, the reserve became popular with tourists after a 1983 National Geographic article dubbed it a mecca for bird lovers. It's now not only one of the most visited areas in Costa Rica, but one of the rarest habitats on Earth.

This tropical jungle paradise is a natural wonder. At 1,440 metres (4,662 feet) above sea level, there's a constant mist in the forest, which looks like clouds enveloping the towering treetops; it's simply spectacular. This unique microclimate and the humidity it creates is what makes this verdant forest flourish. One of the best things about Monteverde's cooling mist is that – unlike in most tropical forests – you won't suffer from the heat.

The area, which covers 14,200 hectares (35,089 acres), is made up of eight different biological zones and is home to five per cent of the world's biodiversity. This includes more than 2,500 plants (with 425 different orchids), 400 bird species, and more than 100 mammals. It's a wildlife paradise abundant with lazy sloths, colourful toucans, elegant jaguars and playful monkeys. But the hidden gem to search for is the resplendent quetzal, one of the world's most beautiful birds.

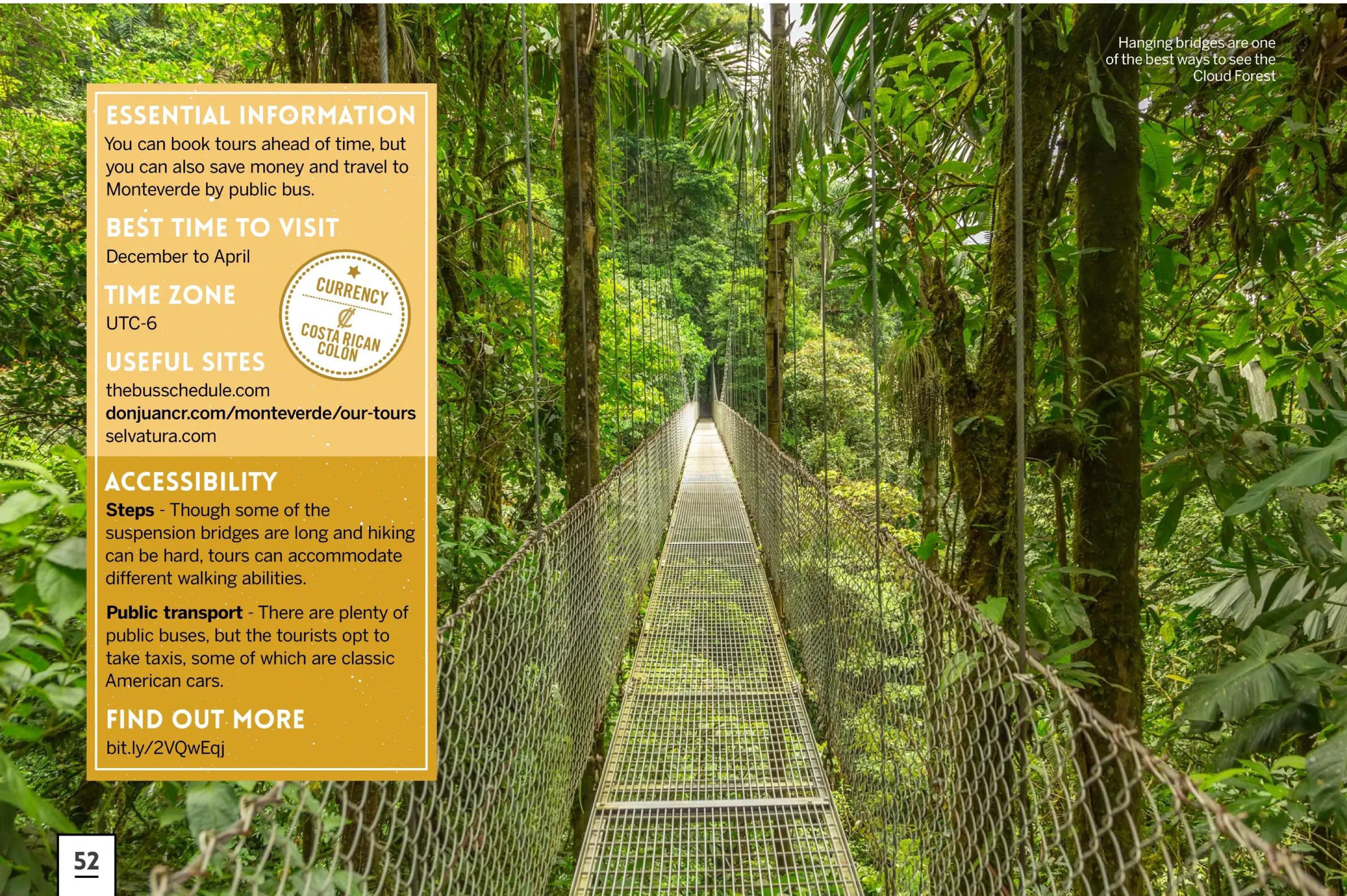
The Cloud Forest Reserve is a three-hour drive from San José, and is a must for anyone visiting Costa Rica. Only three per cent of the forest is open to visitors, making it truly special, as there are few signs of human interruption. There are 13 kilometres (eight miles) of trails to explore with hanging bridges and hidden waterfalls leading you through the evergreen forest. It's worth going early in the morning if you're looking to spot some of its wild inhabitants at their most active, or try a night walk for something completely different. A guide is also recommended if you want to maximise what you see and learn on your trip.

If you're an adventurer, you can view the scenery from a different perspective with an adrenaline boost. The forest is renowned for its canopy tours and awesome ziplining. Fly through the air Superman-style on the 1,590-metre (5,216-foot) long zipline, the longest in Latin America, or freefall for 45 metres (148 feet) on the Tarzan swing. If you can bear to open your eyes, it's breathtaking in more ways than one. For the less daring, the Sky Tram also offers stunning vistas.

If you're not a fan of crowds, the smaller Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve is less busy, although you won't see the quetzal here. And if you have time, the Children's Eternal Rainforest, which is six times as big, is also worth hiking.

A few kilometres away, the peaceful town of Santa Elena is the best place to visit to shop and try local Tico food. Foodies can take the Don Juan coffee plantation tour to discover how chocolate, sugar cane juice and coffee are made. If you haven't had enough adventure, there's horseback riding or canyoning and plenty more to keep you entertained.

Whether you're an adventurer, a birdwatcher, a hiker or a foodie, a trip to Monteverde is sure to be true bliss.



Hanging bridges are one of the best ways to see the Cloud Forest

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

You can book tours ahead of time, but you can also save money and travel to Monteverde by public bus.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to April

TIME ZONE

UTC-6

CURRENCY
₡
COSTA RICAN COLON

USEFUL SITES

thebusschedule.com
donjuancr.com/monteverde/our-tours
selvatura.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Though some of the suspension bridges are long and hiking can be hard, tours can accommodate different walking abilities.

Public transport - There are plenty of public buses, but the tourists opt to take taxis, some of which are classic American cars.

FIND OUT MORE

bit.ly/2VQwEqj

The majestic Maya ruins of Tikal contains thousands of ancient structures to explore

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Take an early morning tour to beat the hot midday sun.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to February, to catch the dry season

TIME ZONE

UTC-6

CURRENCY

Q

GUATEMALAN QUETZAL

USEFUL SITES

tikalnationalpark.org

tikalpark.com

whc.unesco.org/en/list/64/

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - It is a one kilometre (0.62 mile) uphill walk from the car park to the Great Plaza. Steep staircases lead to the temples, and it can be a difficult site to navigate because of roots and uneven ground.

Public transport - There is a shuttle bus which runs from Flores to Tikal each day, and you can find many guided or unguided tours. A private car and driver is also an option.

FIND OUT MORE

tikalpark.com/#!/parkmag

33 TIKAL NATIONAL PARK

Deep in the jungle of Central America lie the ruins of an ancient civilisation

Thousands of years ago, in what is now Guatemala's Petén region, once lay the city of Tikal, one of the largest metropolises of the Maya world. This ancient civilisation pre-dates both the Aztec and Inca empires, and ruled over much of Mexico and northern Central America between 250 and 900 CE.

At the height of its power, Tikal was home to as many as 100,000 Maya people and boasted palaces, plazas, towering temples, imposing ceremonial platforms and residences. However, when the Maya Empire collapsed in around 900, Tikal was abandoned and the jungle that surrounded the city gradually reclaimed the land. In fact, it wasn't until 1848 that the ruins were uncovered by an expedition sent by the Guatemalan Government.

Archaeologists travelled from far and wide to explore this ancient wonder, uncovering tombs of Tikal's greatest rulers, such as Ah Cacau (Lord Chocolate) and intricate carvings that shed light on the mysterious Maya.

We now know the Maya were accomplished mathematicians, artists, astronomers and architects. Temple IV was once the tallest building in pre-Columbian America, looming 65 metres (213 feet) in the air. These days visitors can climb to the top for spectacular views, but back then the Maya would have gazed at the skies to track the planetary movements to plan their ceremonial calendar and to predict when to plant and harvest crops.

There are endless trails to explore around Tikal, and as you hike from temple to temple you can soak up the sights and sounds of the surrounding wildlife. You'll feel like an intrepid adventurer as you get up close to the dozens of stone pillars (called stelae) throughout the plaza, each containing carvings and glyphs that, once deciphered, reveal important dates and deeds. Tikal is generally less crowded than other Maya sites in Central America, too, as it's not as easy to reach. But with so much to see, it's no wonder that most favour Tikal over the many other famous ruins in the region.

34 HAWAII

Enjoy a warm welcome in the USA's Pacific Island paradise

Aloha. Not only is Hawaii's most famous word used as a greeting, it also means love and compassion. It's an apt expression, since most visitors fall in love at their first sight of the Aloha State.

Nearly every visitor will begin their Hawaiian adventure at the airport or cruise terminal of the state capital, Honolulu. This city of one million is the urban heart of Hawaii; seven times bigger than the next largest town with some three-quarters of resident Hawaiians calling it home. Here you'll immediately spot a sea of Hawaiian shirts, the colourful clothing that has become the region's most famous export. Tourist shops have gaudy prints in abundance to make wearers look like a modern-day John Candy or Magnum PI, but most resident Hawaiians choose a more restrained version in which the design is printed on the inside of the fabric to create a more muted look.

On the western fringes of Honolulu is Pearl Harbor, the US naval base that was seared into history on 7 December 1941, "a date that will live in infamy," according to then-president Franklin Roosevelt. A surprise Japanese attack damaged all eight battleships anchored in the harbour and sank eight other ships. Countless ground installations and buildings were destroyed, and nearly 2,500 Americans were killed. All this before their country had even declared war.

Nearly eight decades on, the centrepiece of Pearl Harbor is the USS Arizona Memorial, a pontoon building that floats above the wreck of the only battleship not to be raised after the attack. Accessed by boat from the harbourside, the memorial is a moving tribute. A marble wall listing the names of the 1,177 victims who lost their lives when the ship sank, an opening in the floor overlooks the water above the ship's decks. Occasional oil slicks – often referred to as the "tears of the Arizona" – are a poignant reminder that the USS Arizona still sits just a few metres below the surface, the last resting place of more than 1,100 servicemen whose bodies have never been recovered.

In 1999, USS Missouri – the vessel on which a Japanese delegation surrendered in 1945 – was moved to Pearl Harbor and berthed close to the Arizona memorial, meaning that the start and end of American involvement in World War II are commemorated in one place. Visitors are able to tour the Missouri, and also USS Bowfin, a 1940s submarine. Ford Island, in the middle of the harbour, is home to the Pacific Aviation Museum and a collection of restored fighter planes. Plan to spend a full day here if you wish to do Pearl Harbor justice.

With the history visited, it's time to hit the beach. Conveniently, one of the best in the world is located just 19 kilometres (12 miles) away: Waikiki Beach. Within strolling distance of Downtown Honolulu, Waikiki is actually a series of eight distinct beaches of powder-soft white sand running for a couple of kilometres in front of the boardwalk, behind which sit an array of hotels, bars and restaurants. Most of the hotels offer a luau, a traditional feast encompassing a buffet, music, hula and other Polynesian entertainments. Burn off the calories with a spot

THE TOWERING HILL OF DIAMOND HEAD IS A REMINDER OF HAWAII'S VOLCANIC ORIGIN

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Ticket prices for different luau vary widely, so ask around before you buy.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

All year round due to relatively stable weather

TIME ZONE

UTC-10

CURRENCY
$
US DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

gohawaii.com
govisithawaii.com
hawaii.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - There are lots of steep hills. Some sights (like lava viewing) may be unsafe for those with limited mobility.

Public transport - There are frequent flights to Hawaii and between the islands. You can travel within the islands by bus or taxi, but accessible van rentals may work out cheaper.

FIND OUT MORE

gohawaii.com/trip-planning/accessibility

The sun, sea and surf at Waikiki Beach make it a busy place, although it is usually possible to find a stretch of unclaimed sand

Hawaii's Kilauea caldera is one of the most active volcanoes in the world

of snorkelling at Fort DeRussy Beach, where a coral reef sits just beyond the waves, or take a surfing lesson at Kuhio Beach.

Most postcards of Waikiki Beach feature the sand in the foreground and Diamond Head in the background. This towering hill is a reminder of Hawaii's volcanic origins. Diamond Head is an extinct crater, and it's a tough climb up the solidified lava with plenty of steps. It's best left to those with strong legs and a head for heights, but the view across Honolulu and the Pacific for those who do reach the summit makes the burning thighs worthwhile.

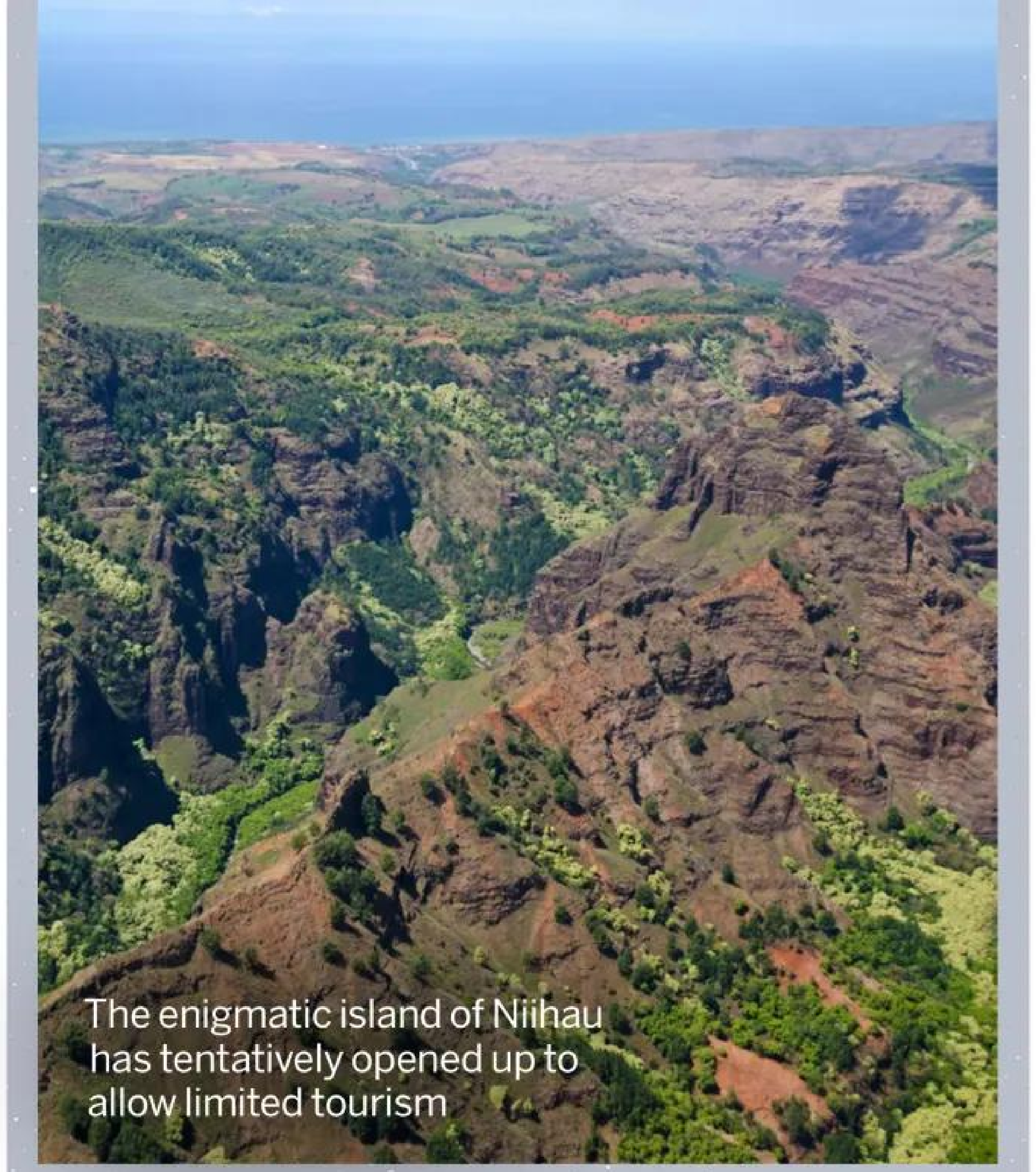
Those who venture away from busy Honolulu and Oahu find that the pace of life is slower, but the natural wonders are just as impressive. On the island of Maui, rent a car and drive to Hana. This 80-kilometre (50-mile) stretch winds along the coast and can be done in a couple of hours, but it is best to take all day to admire the beaches and waterfalls that run downhill from Koolau Forest Reserve. Beyond Hana, the road is suitable only for off-road vehicles, but it does lead to the Oheo Gulch Pools. Canny tourist operators nicknamed these the Seven Sacred Pools, although they're not actually sacred and there are far more than seven. Don't let that stop you from swimming beneath the falls that feed the clear pools.

The island of Hawaii (Big Island to the locals) is, unsurprisingly, the largest in the archipelago. Hotfoot it to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, the best place to explore the islands' fiery beginnings. Marvel at the steamy spectacle of Kilauea, one of the most active volcanoes in the world, by cruising the Crater Rim Drive. Then enjoy an underground view of a volcano by walking through the Thurston Lava Tube, which was emptied of molten rock a few centuries ago. However, be aware that this is still an active volcanic zone, and roads are often closed due to lava flows and ongoing eruptions.

Those in search of further adventures can explore Waimea Canyon and the Na Pali Coast State Park on the garden isle of Kauai, the former leper colony on Molokai, or the traditional culture of the pineapple isle of Molokai – once wholly owned by the Hawaiian Pineapple Company to grow the exotic fruit.

However, it's a mistake to cram too much in to a Hawaiian trip. Don't forget to leave to time do very little. With 1,210 kilometres (750 miles) of coastline, every island has a surplus of fantastic beaches to choose from. Soak up the year-round sun, sip a cocktail and enjoy the hospitality of Hawaii's famously friendly people. After all, this is the Aloha State, best enjoyed the aloha way.

The memorials and museums at Pearl Harbor draw history buffs from across the world



The enigmatic island of Niihau has tentatively opened up to allow limited tourism

FORBIDDEN ISLE

The westernmost of Hawaii's eight main islands, Niihau has remained stubbornly isolated from the tourist industry. Purchased from the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1864 by a Scottish widow whose descendents have fiercely protected the island from modernising influences, entry is barred to all but residents, their invited guests and a few military personnel. According to reports, there is no alcohol, no phone lines or internet, no cars and no indoor plumbing.

Yet Niihau is cautiously opening up to outsiders. Curious sightseers can now take an authorised helicopter tour from neighbouring Kauai, which circles the island and lands on an undeveloped beach, albeit well away from any residents or their dwellings. Boat tours also leave Kauai to anchor off Niihau for snorkelling and diving, but they too must maintain a discreet distance. For now, visitors must be satisfied with only a glimpse of the pristine and peaceful Forbidden Isle.

The beautiful and unique landscape of coastal Oahu and the Kualoa Ranch is where *Jurassic Park* was filmed

35 RIO DE JANEIRO

Bathe in the Brazilian sunshine in the country's seaside city

Known to locals as the Cidade Maravilhosa – the marvellous city – it is not hard to believe that Rio de Janeiro is seen as the beating heart of Brazil. The city is formed of endless stretches of golden sand, unmissable fiestas and boundless mountains as its backdrop. The beaches are one of the main attractions that have lured travellers in over the years, with one of the most famous being Copacabana beach. Stretching over four kilometres (2.5 miles) of white sand, the beach is a great place to hang out and watch the world go by with a caipirinha! Other note-worthy beaches include the nearby beach of Ipanema. It is from this local spot that visitors can expect an unforgettable view of the Dois Irmãos (two brothers). These two mountains sit at the western end of the beach and form an unusual backdrop to it.

When swimming in these shores, it's always best to bear in mind that Ipanema is an indigenous word for 'bad, dangerous waters', which is no surprise given the strong undercurrent and usually choppy surface of the ocean. If there's anything to be learnt from visiting these beaches it's that the locals use them as their back garden. Expect to see countless games of volleyball, surfers playing in the waves, rollerbladers gliding the pavements and power-walkers marching along the promenade. It appears that all of Rio's residents take to the beach to escape the hustle and bustle of city life. With such a laid-back approach on the beaches, it's easy to forget that you're in a city.

If beaches aren't your thing and you prefer sinking your teeth into the culture, then why not embark on a tour to the favelas, or the shanty towns, which form the backbone to this South American urban jungle. During the 1970s, favelas started to grow, as many people fled the countryside in search of more opportunities in the city. Today in Rio alone there are more than 800 favelas; 1.5 million people call a favela home. Part of the appeal to visit the favelas – although it's a form of controversial slum tourism – is the unusual architecture. Each has a unique and distinct design to its building, which is usually a stack of misshapen buildings piled on top of one another like Lego. Arguably the most famous of Rio's favelas is Santa Marta, located in Botafogo. Its fame is due to a Michael Jackson tribute statue that can be found here. The largest of the favelas of Rio is Rocinha, but it's not advised to visit here unless you are travelling with a tour guide, as it can be unsafe.

A trip to Rio would not be complete without taking the cable car up to Sugarloaf mountain, also known as Pão de Açúca. This is one of the several monolithic granite and quartz mountains that tower over the city. This picture-perfect mountain reaches 396 metres (1,299 feet), and invites visitors to experience a 360-degree view

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

At the airport, go to the departure zone to take a taxi. Taxis are less expensive here than at the arrival zone.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

February (to ensure you don't miss out on Carnival)

CURRENCY
R$
BRAZILIAN REAL

TIME ZONE

UTC-3

USEFUL SITES

brazil.org.za/rio-de-janeiro-city.html
riodejaneiro.com/v/city-info
gringo-rio.com/accommodation-travel-**in-rio/getting-around-rio**

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Lofty landmarks like Sugarloaf Mountain, Christ the Redeemer and the Santa Teresa district can be reached by cable car, railway and tram, but some sections are off-limits.

Public transport - The 2016 Rio Games spurred some infrastructure upgrades, including improved metro trains and trams, but road and pavement conditions are still poor in places.

FIND OUT MORE

curbfreewithcorylee.com/2016/12/12/wheelchair-accessible-rio-de-janeiro-tour/

> ON THE BEACHES IT'S EASY TO FORGET THAT YOU'RE IN A CITY

Don't miss the unbeatable view from the top of Corcovado

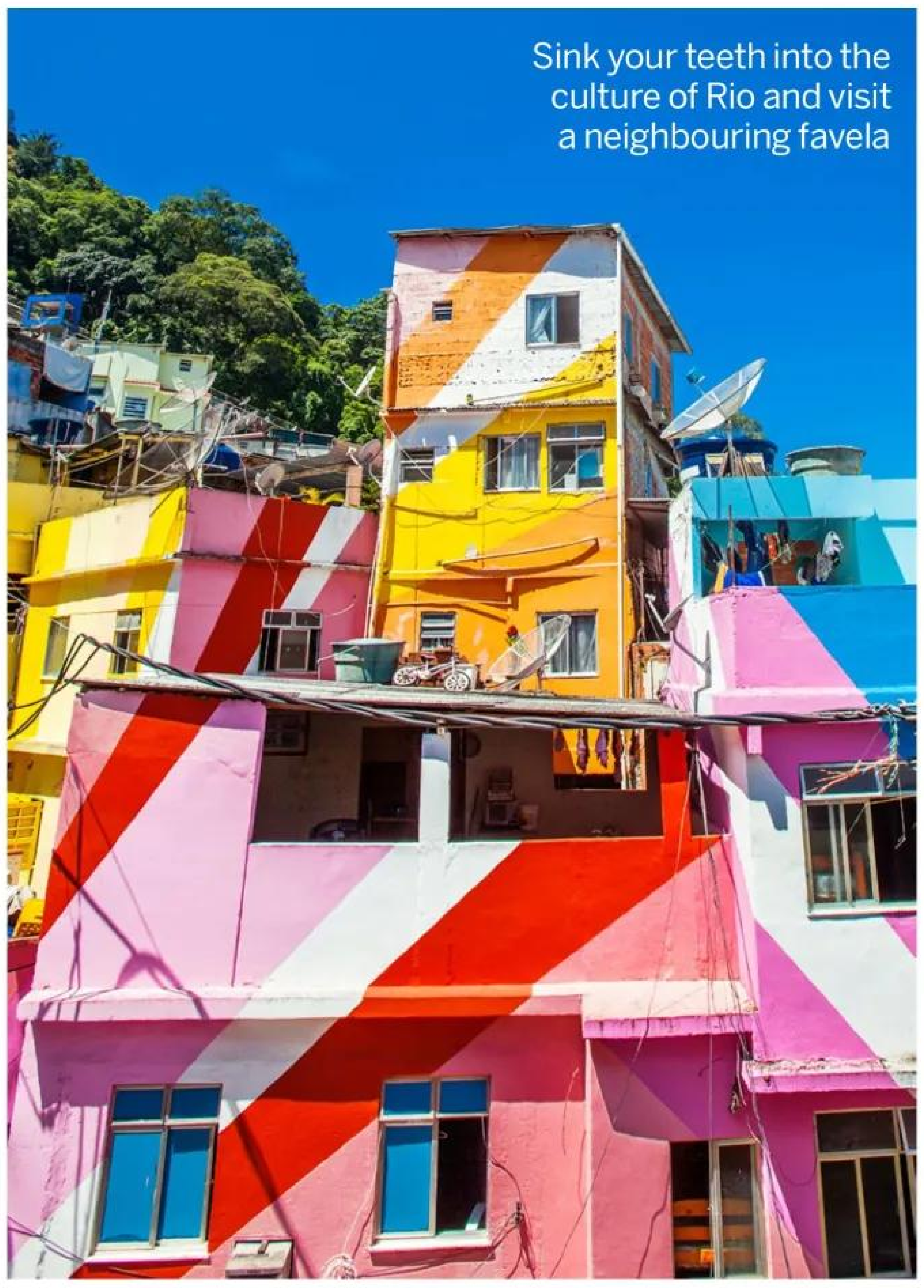
Take the cable car up to the top of Sugarloaf Mountain to see the 360-degree view of the city and its golden beaches

Embrace the colours and sounds of the biggest party on Earth

of the city, Guanabara Bay and the endless blue waters of the Atlantic that form below it. In order to reach the summit, you have to ascend in two stages: first to the top of Urca Hill and then from here in a cable car to the top of the mountain. Both journeys last a total of three minutes, and tickets for the experience can be bought at the base of the mountain.

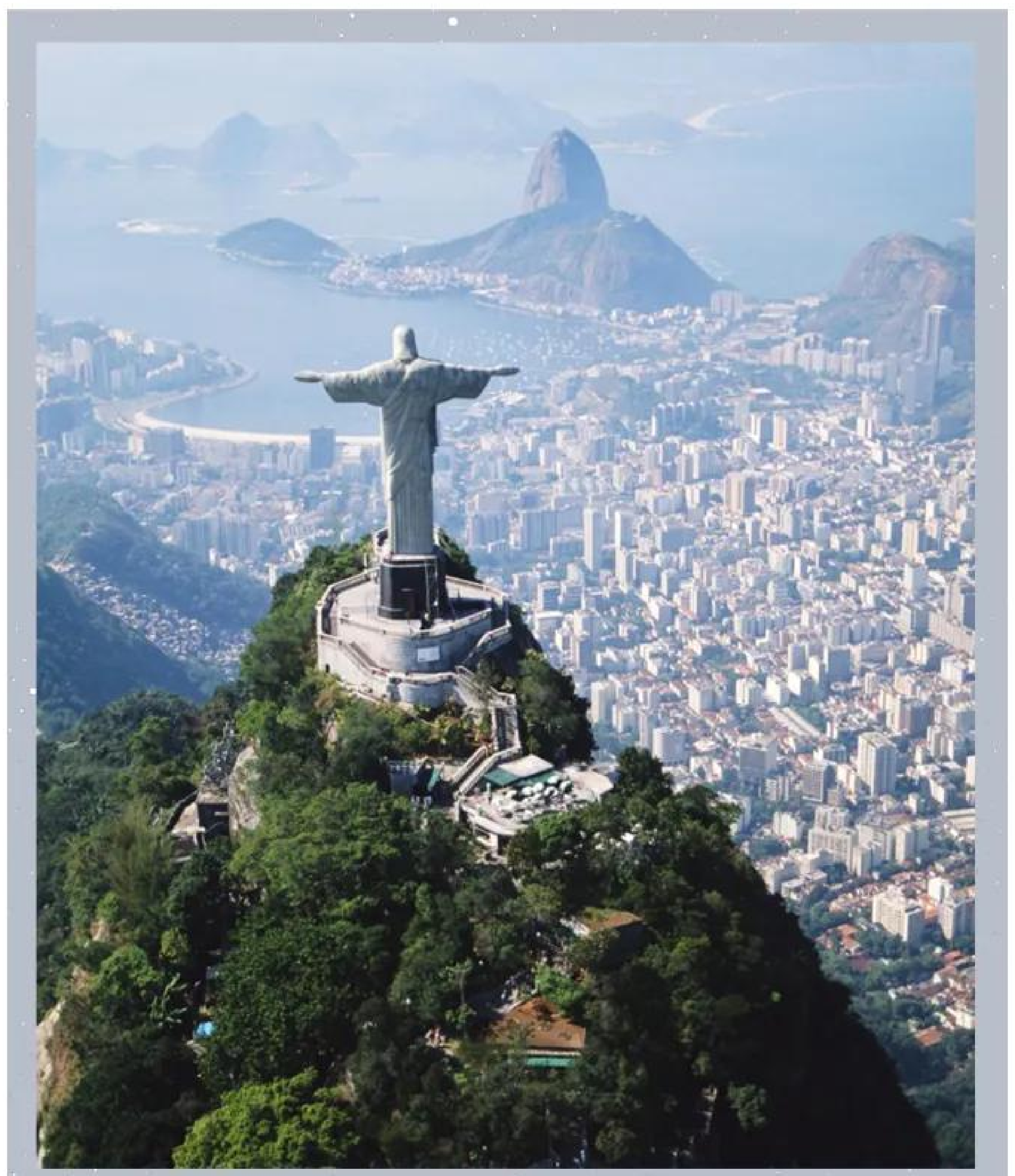
If partying is what you are after, then you've come to the right place! Music, samba and dance flow through this city, and it's not an unusual site to find people dancing in the streets. The biggest party of all falls in February each year, and is commonly known as Rio Carnival. The world's best-known party calls on more than two million people to flock to the streets and dance the days away to the sounds of the samba. During Carnival season, local samba schools show off their rhythm in the Sambódrom – a purpose-built exhibition space to hold the samba parade. Party-goers can also enjoy the beat by boogying at one of the 500 street parties that continue way into the early hours of the morning. If you plan on visiting Rio during Carnival, it's best to pack your dancing shoes, sequins and endless feathers, as they don't take dressing up lightly! The wackier the costume, the more you're likely to fit in and feel at home – just watch out for the 'Bate Bolas', a group of young men dressed as vibrant jesters with beach-ball whips.

If you have any energy left, hail a taxi to the district of Lapa, as this is another great place to dance and grab a generously sized caprinha. Rio is absolutely overflowing with energy and life – it truly is the city that never sleeps.



Sink your teeth into the culture of Rio and visit a neighbouring favela

Soak up the sun with a caprinha on the famous beach of Copacabana



CHRIST THE REDEEMER

At the top of Corcovado sits the iconic art-deco statue of Christ the Redeemer standing in all its glory. Located at Parque Nacional de Tijuca, 710 metres (2,329 feet) above sea level, it's impossible to imagine a trip to Rio without marvelling at the grandeur of the granite peak. Reaching the statue can be an achievement in itself. After the 20-minute train ride, there are more than 220 steps that need climbing to lead you to the famous statue's feet. However, it's worth the effort when you reach the top and can see the panoramic views of the city that fall at the feet of Corcovado. Anyone who travels on Corcovado's railway also helps to preserve the forest, as a proportion of the fee goes towards the Brazilian Institute of the Environment (IBAMA), which is in charge of forest conservation.

36 ROUTE 66

Get ready for the ride of your life along the Mother Road

You'll be treated to some incredible scenery en route

When you journey along Route 66, you never quite know when you've reached the end. That's because there is some debate over where the finish line lies, but it's also because the route offers so many life-affirming experiences that it could easily be the start of something new: a taste of the open road.

Route 66 rolls across America from Chicago to Santa Monica (or to 7th street in Downtown Los Angeles depending on who you talk to), taking you through the Native American reservations while brushing past exciting cities as you journey across Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Should you choose to go the extra distance to the junction of Olympic and Lincoln Boulevards in Santa Monica (and you must), then you'd be covering 3,940 kilometres.

During the Great Depression, Route 66 – which came into being in 1926, linking the roads between small towns and country byways from east to west – was a lifeline for those seeking a better life, a poignant history of the highway.

It became a symbol of hope. Motorcars were growing in popularity, and Route 66 helped to boost the economy. As traffic increased, people flocked to the roadside to cater for passing motorists. It led to a rise in motels, gas stations and restaurants and, once the road was tarmaced in 1938 – the first in America – it could be used come rain or shine.

Today, Route 66 remains the world's greatest road trip, even though it was effectively wiped from the map in the 1980s and entails digging out atlases that retrace the historic highway. It certainly has awe-inspiring beginnings. Drive over to Adams Street in downtown Chicago and you will see the 'Historic Route' start sign marking 'Illinois US 66' that will get the mind racing about the journey that lies ahead. It won't be long before you're riding through the cornfields south of Chicago and seeing the landmark Gemini Giant advertising 'Muffler Man' statue of an astronaut holding a rocket ship at the eastern entrance to Wilmington.

It's a charming start that will eventually take you past scores more off-beat roadside attractions and delightful little stops. Eventually, you'll pass the famous murals of Pontiac and reach Atlanta, Illinois, a city of just 1,700 people over 3.284 square kilometres that was once a frequent stop for president Abraham Lincoln. Head over to Palms Grills Cafe and tuck into some fine fare, glimpsing across the street at yet another Muffler Man, this time the Paul Bunyon Hotdog Statue. Created in Cicero, Illinois, in 1966, it was moved to Atlanta in 2003 when the original hotdog stand closed.

There's more Lincoln-fare to be seen in Springfield, Illinois' capital, the president's home for 24 years. As well as its corn dog snack, you can swing into the Maid-Rite Sandwich Shop, which claims to be the first US drive-thru, before taking in the Lincoln Home National Historic Site, Lincoln's Tomb and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. Once done, why not check out another Muffler Man – this time in the car park of the Lauterbatch Tire and auto service – before heading over to St Louis in Missouri, home of the 192-metre GateWay Arch, and the location of the Missouri Botanical Gardens, numerous museums and Saint Louis Zoo which is free to visit.

In many ways, the true delights are outside of the cities. Continue on to Fanning and you'll spot the Route 66 Red Rocker, the world's second largest rocking chair. You'll cross the Meramec River US 66 Bridge and check out the Meramec Caverns in the Ozarks that were formed by erosion. If you're looking for somewhere to lay your head, drive to the neon-signed Munger Moss Motel in Lebanon, which was added to a sandwich shop, filling station and restaurant in 1946. It is right by a classic bowling alley, too, if you fancy some extra fun.

Keep driving to Kansas where there are 13 miles of Route 66 highways, numbered US-69. This is the shortest state stretch of Route 66,

OATMAN POST OFFICE
OATMAN, ARIZONA 86433
ELEVATION 2,700

Uncover the history along Route 66 as you ride it

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

As long as you have a driving license at home, you can hire a car in the USA

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May or June, to enjoy good weather without scorching sunshine

TIME ZONE

UTC-6, -7 and -8

USEFUL SITES

historic66.com

route66guide.com

roadtripusa.com/route-66

CURRENCY $ US DOLLAR

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - For many sights, you don't have to leave the car, but plan ahead for stops like the Grand Canyon. Roadside motels and diners are often single storey.

Public transport - There are plenty of guided coach tours on offer. There's even a railroad option following the same route.

FIND OUT MORE

disabled-world.com/travel/usa/route-66.php

MOTEL
66
ROUTE 66
Welcome to KINGMAN
CLEANROOMS AIR PHONES
CABLE TV SCIFI ESPN POOL
29 95 39 95 3BEDS EXTRA
TRUCKS OK
VACANCY

There are plenty of places to stay along the route

ROUTE 66 REMAINS THE WORLD'S GREATEST ROAD TRIP

but fill up at the Old Kan-O-Tex service station dating back to 1934 and buy refreshments at Eisler Bros Old Riverton Store, which was rebuilt in 1925 following a tornado. You can also walk over a concrete arch bridge built in 1923 that became part of Route 66 three years later.

Into Oklahoma and you're on to the longest drivable stretch of Route 66 with more than 400 miles of jaw-dropping scenery and goofy roadside attractions to keep you occupied. You're well into cowboy territory here, so take a nosy around the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. Visit the modern gem that is Pops to see the glass walls of the restaurant packed full with soda pop bottles arranged by colour, which you can buy. You may also want to check out the Blue Whale of Catoosa, which was built in the 1970s by Hugh Davis as a gift to his wife who collected whale figurines.

Hit Texas and you'll be driving through the vast plains of the Texas panhandle, a lonely yet reflective journey that requires a good map if you want to stick to the original route rather than Interstate-40. There are some lovely sights – the Cadillac Ranch in the cowboy town of Amarillo being one – as well as the Texan ghost town of Glenrio, which suffered when Route 66 was destroyed in the 1980s. After crossing into New Mexico, consider stopping at the city of Tucumcari (you'll see signs saying Tucumcari Tonight, advertising rooms in vintage hotels), but also enjoy the neon signs and historic ranches. If you decide on a few hours in Santa Fe, it's the site of the oldest church in the US, San Miguel Mission. The Kimo theatre in Albuquerque astounds with its Art Deco theatre.

In Arizona, the Petrified Forest National Park is the only national park that protects a section of Route 66. Meanwhile, Earth's best-preserved meteorite impact site is also off Route 66 – it was here that an asteroid travelling at 42,000 kilometres per hour smashed into our planet 50,000 years ago, causing a crater 1.6 kilometres across and 168 metres deep. With the Grand Canyon National Park continuing to astound, villages such as Hackberry and Oatman are worth a visit. The latter has moved from gold mining to tourism thanks to the Mother Road, and it has streets roamed by wild burros that you can feed.

The buildings along Route 66 are relics of a bygone era

Savour the last leg of the journey: the trip through California to the cities that migrants flocked to. Your first glimpse of the state will be the Old Trails Bridge over the Colorado River on an abandoned portion of Route 66, but continue down and you can eat at the iconic Roy's Motel and Cafe in Amboy with its world-famous sign outside, then go on to visit the Calico Ghost Town – a former silver mining town founded in 1881, which is now a country park.

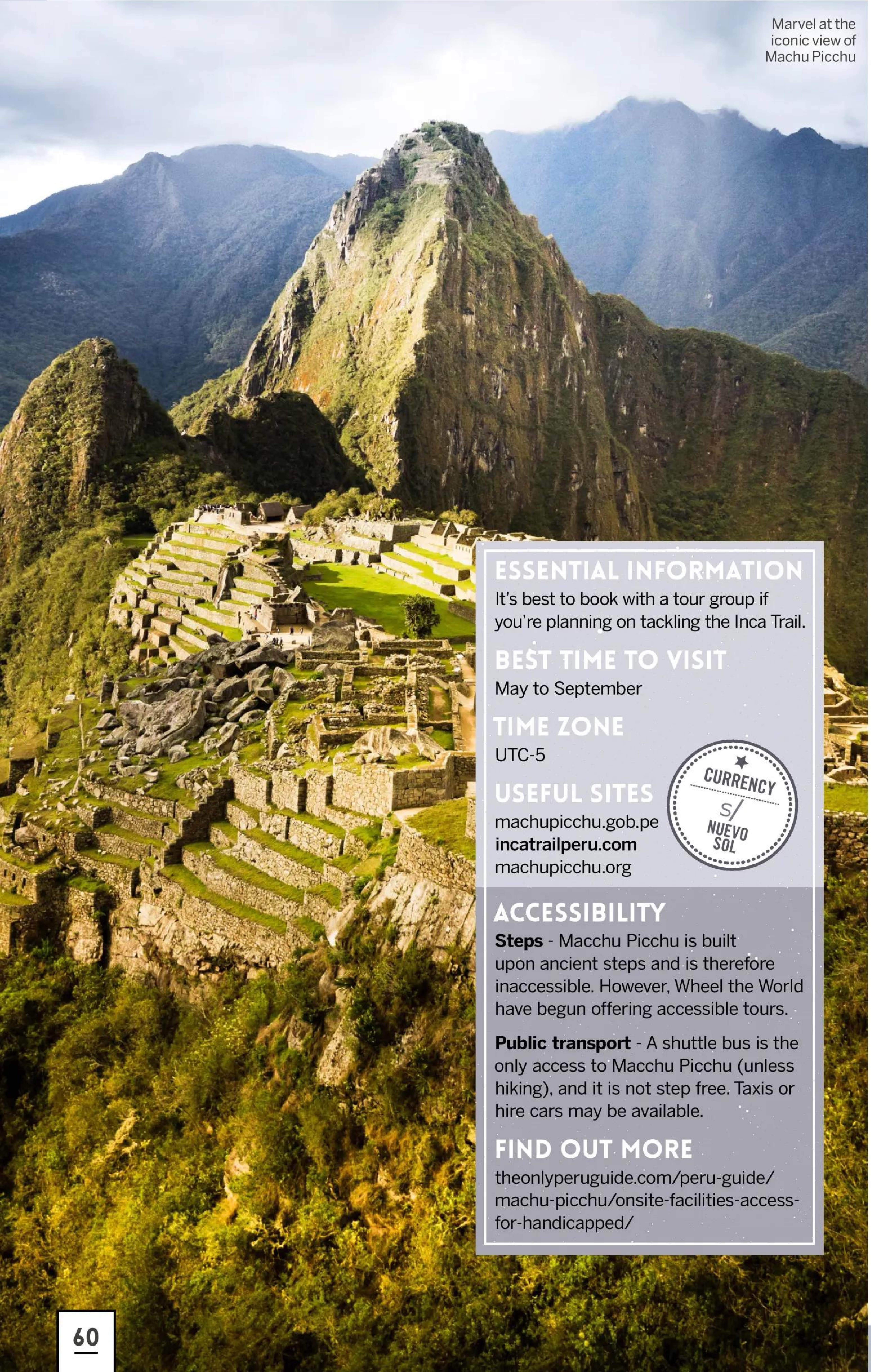
In Pasadena, tour the Rose Bowl Stadium, while in Victorville in the Mojave Desert you can look around the California Route 66 Museum. You can bask in the glamour that is Hollywood en route to Santa Monica where the official 'End of the Trail' sign is located. Here, you can relax and look out over the Pacific Ocean, thinking about all the things you have seen and the wonderful people you have met along the way.

37 MACHU PICCHU

Grab your hiking boots and your camera and marvel at Peru's iconic landmark

Machu Picchu is a historical site that many people consider the trademark stamp of Peru. Machu Picchu stands in all its glory at an elevation of 2,350 metres (7,710 feet). Granted a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983, the site of ancient Inca ruins is located 80 kilometres (50 miles) northwest of Cuzco, in the Cordillera de Vilcabamba of the Andes Mountains. Nestled above the Urubamba River between two steep peaks of Machu Picchu (old peak) and the Huayna Picchu (new peak), this ancient city laid undiscovered to the West until the early part of the 20th century, when it was uncovered by Yale University professor Hiram Bingham in 1911 on an excursion by a local Quechua-speaking resident. Bingham had been in search of the 'lost city of the Incas'.

Now, the site is a famous archaeological maze that is commonly reached by tourists along the iconic Inca Trail. Each year, 75,000 people flock to the path in search of the Sacred Valley. The world-famous trek in South America is 42 kilometres (26 miles) long, and covers lush cloud forests, subtropical jungle, endless mountain views and Inca-paved ruins. However, sadly, due to an increase in tourism this route has become well-trodden and today the park limits it to only 500 people per day to control the damage to the ecosystem. Bearing this in mind, it's worth checking out more sustainable and less congested routes up to the famous view. One of these options is the five-to-eight-day hike on the Salkantay Route through the mountains on the outskirts of Machu Picchu. If hiking is how you plan on reaching the panoramic view, then it's important to consider training in order to prepare your body for the physical demands of the hike. The high altitude and steep climbs can cause havoc on people uncustomed to it. Altitude sickness is a common problem and is caused by rapid exposure to low amounts of oxygen at high elevation. Some of the symptoms of this can include headaches, vomiting and dizziness – all of which are not ideal when climbing up mountains. In order to try and prevent this from happening, it's best to put in some aerobic training beforehand, as well as partaking in local incline walks to help with building up strength



Marvel at the iconic view of Machu Picchu

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

It's best to book with a tour group if you're planning on tackling the Inca Trail.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to September

TIME ZONE

UTC-5

USEFUL SITES

machupicchu.gob.pe
incatrailperu.com
machupicchu.org

★ CURRENCY
S/
NUEVO SOL

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Macchu Picchu is built upon ancient steps and is therefore inaccessible. However, Wheel the World have begun offering accessible tours.

Public transport - A shuttle bus is the only access to Macchu Picchu (unless hiking), and it is not step free. Taxis or hire cars may be available.

FIND OUT MORE

theonlyperuguide.com/peru-guide/machu-picchu/onsite-facilities-access-for-handicapped/

Embark on the road less travelled and hike up the Salkantay Route

Llamas are iconic visitors to the mountain, and have grown accustomed to living on the steep incline

CONSIDER STOPPING OFF AT THE FAMOUS CITY OF CUZCO

in the legs. You might also want to consider stopping off at the famous city of Cuzco to allow your body to gradually get used to the altitude before embarking on your hike.

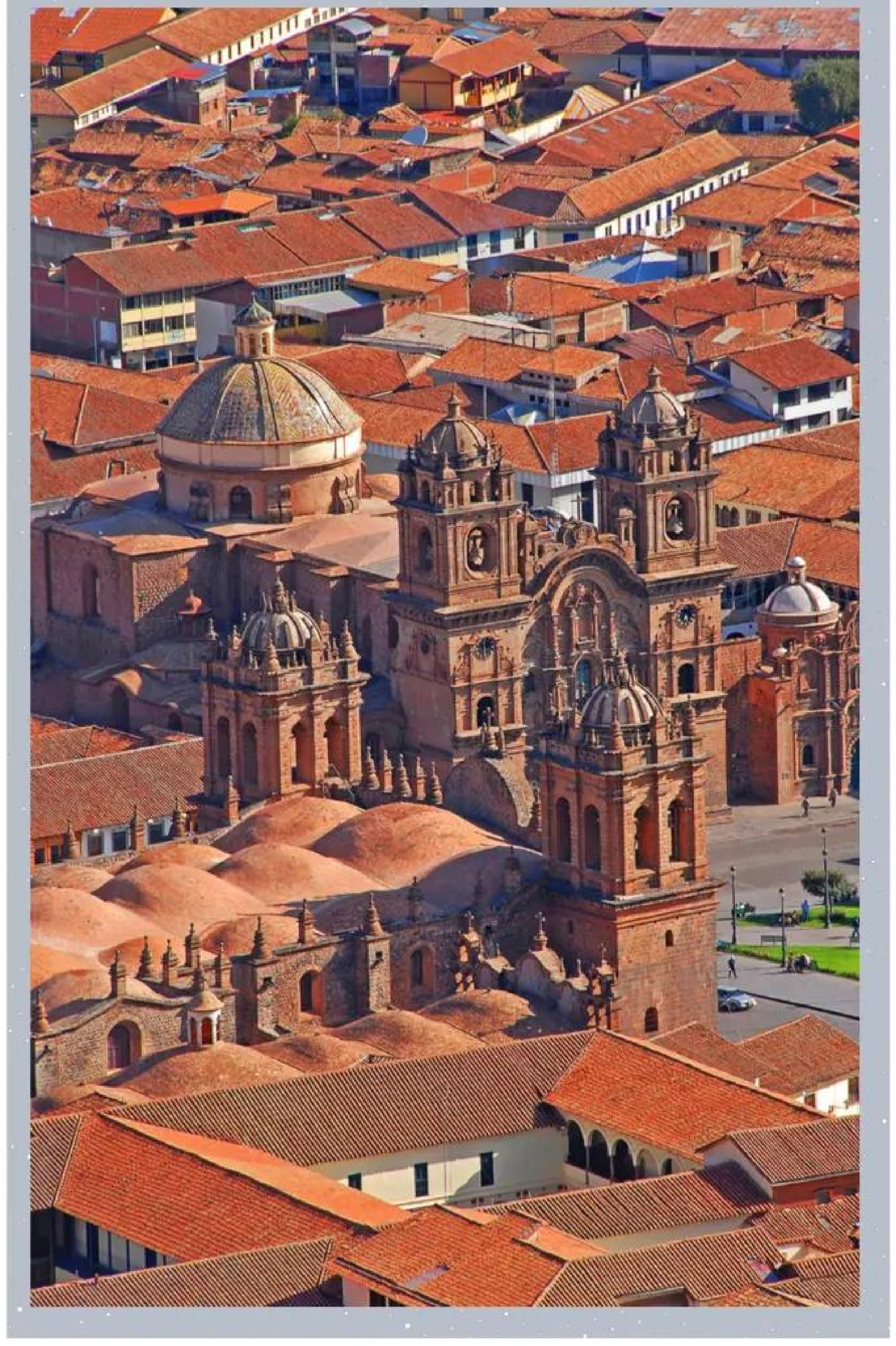
If you are short on time, then there are alternative routes to the top of the famous ruins, which avoid physical exertion and even breaking a sweat! Machu Picchu can be reached and explored within a day. During high season, which runs from May to September, it's imperative that day tickets are booked in advance as there is a limit of 2,500 permits per day that often sell out days before. These permits can be purchased from Dirección Desconcentrada de Cultura Cuzco via its website, or at the official office in Cuzco. The easiest way to reach the ruins is by train from the neighbouring station in Cuzco of Poroy, which runs directly to the small Andean town of Aguas Calientes. Once again, due to popular demand, it is best to book these train tickets in advance from Peru Rail or Inca Rail. To avoid missing out on a full day up at Machu Picchu, it is recommended that you reach Aguas Calientes the day before, as this gives you the opportunity to reach the summit by sunrise. From Aguas Calientes, buses run from as early as 5.30am, and it's a 25-minute ride up the side of the mountain to the site. If you are up for a challenge, there is an eight-kilometre (five-mile) hike up a steep mountainside path. It is only once reaching the top that you realise the full scale of the archaeological site. Upon reaching the summit, don't miss out on visiting the Sun Gate, or the Inti Punku. This is considered one of the primary features of Machu Picchu, and from the top it boasts a panoramic view of the lost city. The stairs leading here are believed to have been the entry and exit point of those visiting the city. If you are up here early enough, head here for sunrise as it is a view that is not to be missed. However, the best view of Machu Picchu is from Huayna Picchu. This is reached by a steep trek and some scrambling, but doesn't require any climbing tools. Children over the age of 12 are allowed to climb the mountain, which is great news if you are travelling with children, as you can all marvel at the view of the citadel and the surrounding landscape together. Other noteworthy sites include the Inca Bridge, Watchman's Hut, the Funerary Stone, Temple of the Sun and the Royal Tomb of the Palace of the Princess. With so much to see, make sure you leave plenty of time to soak up the heritage of this wonder of the world.

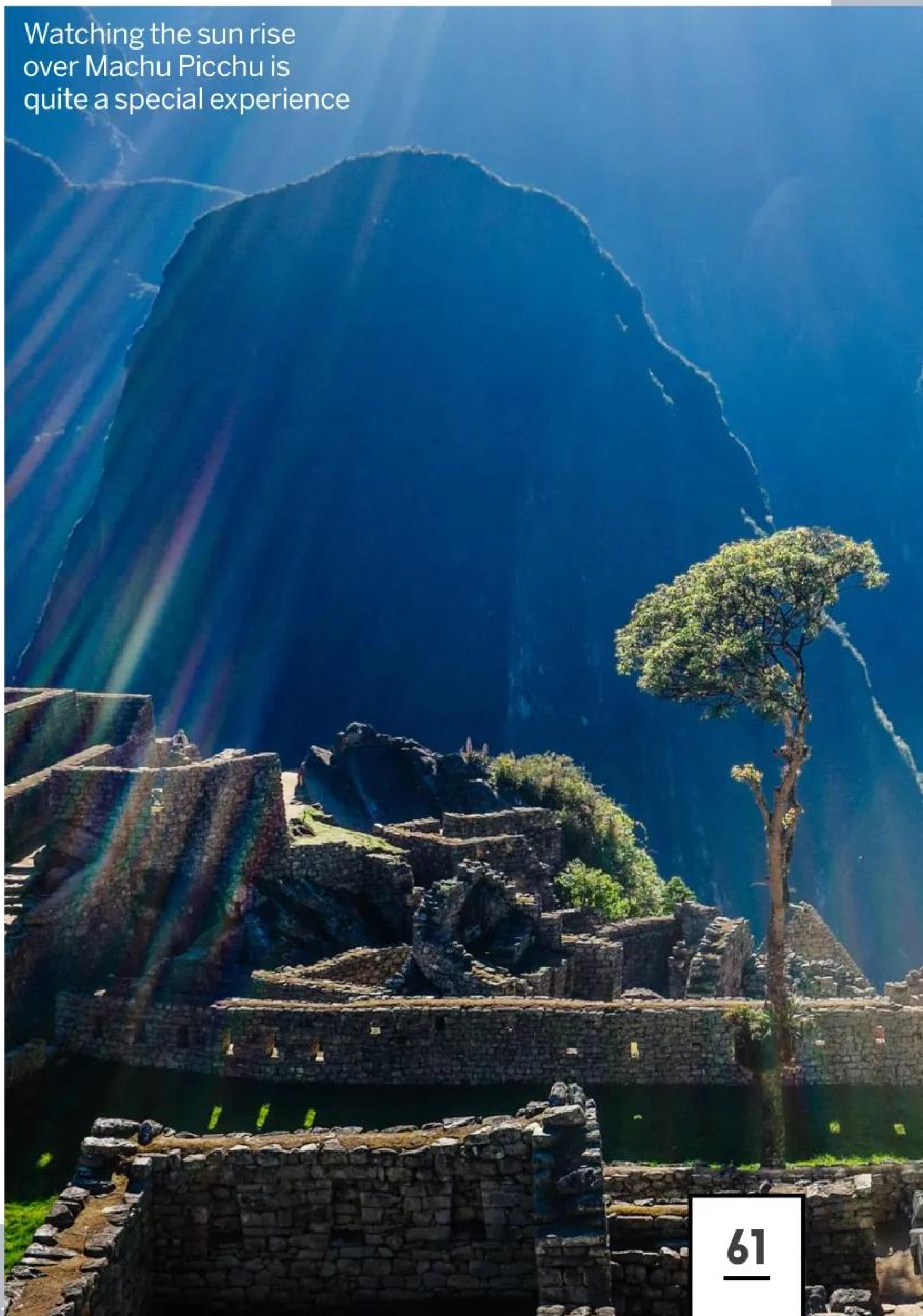
Follow in the footsteps of the Inca Empire as you walk along the steps to the famous Sun Gate

TO SUN GATE
A INTIPUNKU
TO MACHUPICCHU MOUNTAIN
MONTAÑA MACHUPICCHU

CUZCO

Once the capital of the Inca Empire, Cuzco is still the beating heart of Andean culture, and an ancient town that should not be missed. Cuzco is also the famous launching point for many trips to Machu Picchu. One of the many reasons for this is to allow travellers to grow accustomed to the altitude, as the city itself sits at 3,399 metres (11,152 feet). It is also the oldest city in Peru, and provides a mix of Inca and Spanish architecture. If shopping is what you are after, then Cuzco is a mecca for textiles, jewellery and art. Make sure you visit the city's main market, San Pedro Mercado Central, and soak up the culinary culture and colour.





Watching the sun rise over Machu Picchu is quite a special experience

38 MONTREAL

Visit the Francophone city, Canada's cultural and foodie capital

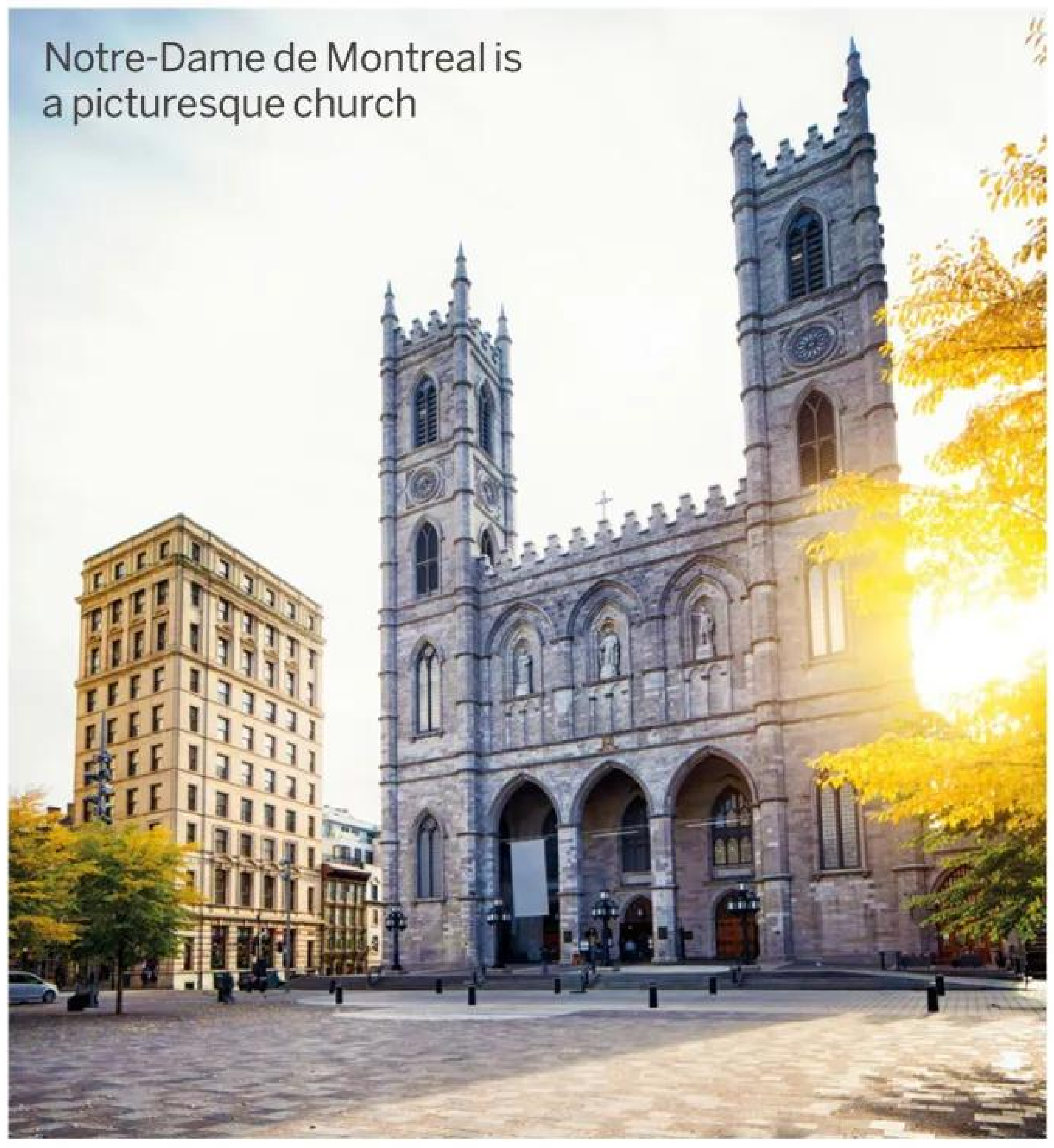
Montreal feels like a little slice of Europe with a splash of contemporary North American design. The skyline is peppered with breathtaking churches and architectural icons that include the Stade Olympique and Habitat 67.

Although the locals love the summer months, winter is what really defines the Québécois, with their cozy fireplaces, friendly pubs, steaming sugar shacks and beautifully white snowy mountains to partake in exciting winter sports.

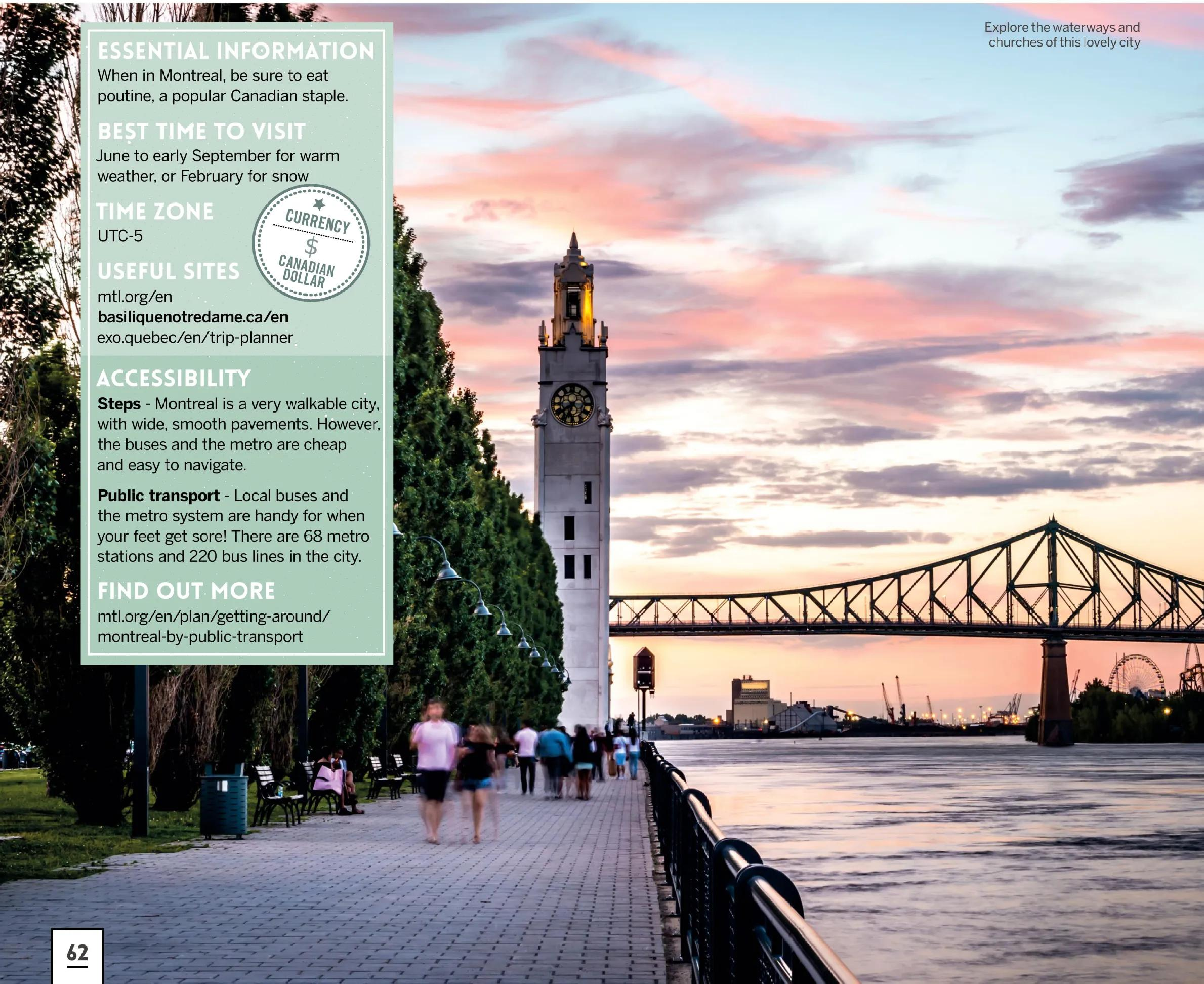
Old Montreal is a must-visit part of the city, and it is composed of pretty squares, old architecture and the traditional main street. Rue Saint-Paul is lined with galleries, shops and restaurants, and then you can head to Place d'Armes, which was once the main square of the city. Its centrepiece is now the Notre-Dame Basilica – the city's most magnificent church. Once you've finished admiring this beautiful building, tuck up and take a calèche, or horse-drawn carriage, for an old-fashioned tour with a difference through Old Montreal. It's a great way to see a lot of the sights all at once, and it will help you decide which landmarks to return to and visit in more detail.

The old port, with its green parkland and cafes, is a lovely place to grab a pastry or afternoon break on the waterfront. Just a few steps away is the Chinatown district, which offers an interesting twist of diaspora culture to your trip.

Make sure that you tell hotels you if you are a senior citizen, because most actually offer discounts. Plus, many travellers aged 60 and over get concessions on museums, theatres and other attractions.



Notre-Dame de Montreal is a picturesque church



Explore the waterways and churches of this lovely city

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

When in Montreal, be sure to eat poutine, a popular Canadian staple.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to early September for warm weather, or February for snow

TIME ZONE

UTC-5

CURRENCY
$
CANADIAN DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

mtl.org/en
basiliquenotredame.ca/en
exo.quebec/en/trip-planner

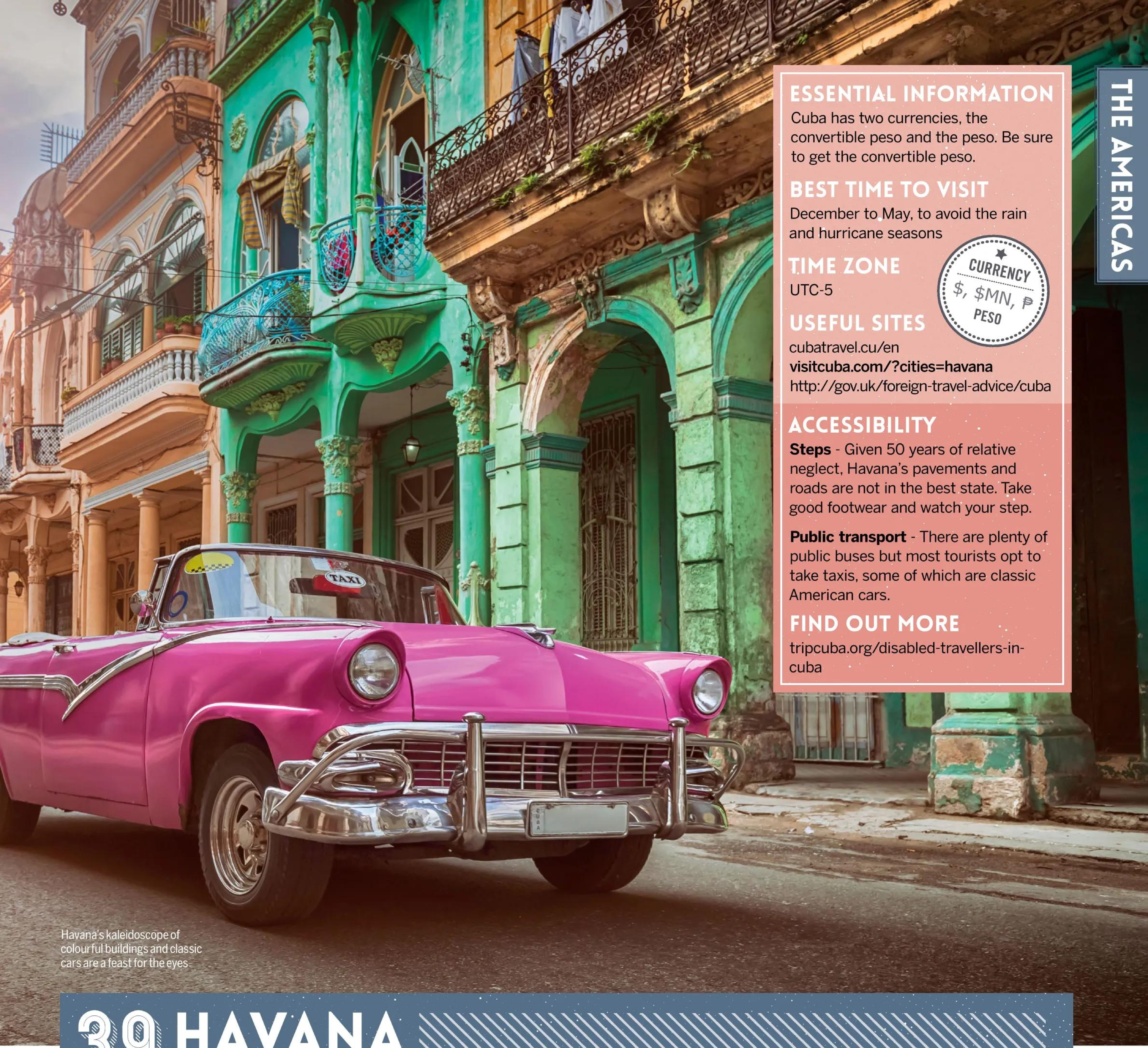
ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Montreal is a very walkable city, with wide, smooth pavements. However, the buses and the metro are cheap and easy to navigate.

Public transport - Local buses and the metro system are handy for when your feet get sore! There are 68 metro stations and 220 bus lines in the city.

FIND OUT MORE

mtl.org/en/plan/getting-around/montreal-by-public-transport



Havana's kaleidoscope of colourful buildings and classic cars are a feast for the eyes

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Cuba has two currencies, the convertible peso and the peso. Be sure to get the convertible peso.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to May, to avoid the rain and hurricane seasons

TIME ZONE

UTC-5

CURRENCY
$, $MN, ₱
PESO

USEFUL SITES

cubatravel.cu/en
visitcuba.com/?cities=havana
http://gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/cuba

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Given 50 years of relative neglect, Havana's pavements and roads are not in the best state. Take good footwear and watch your step.

Public transport - There are plenty of public buses but most tourists opt to take taxis, some of which are classic American cars.

FIND OUT MORE

tripcuba.org/disabled-travellers-in-cuba

39 HAVANA

Communists, cigars and classic cars in Cuba's capital city

Havana may lie only 117 kilometres south of Key West, Florida, but the Caribbean's fourth-largest city still has an air of mystery about it after being isolated from the rest of the world for nearly 50 years.

Fidel Castro's adherence to a centrally planned communist economy, combined with a long-lasting American embargo to freeze the city in the 1950s, cultivated a make-do-and-mend attitude ensuring that Cuba survived while no longer importing goods from across the water. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than on Havana's historic roads, where the swish tail fins of well-used, colourful 1950s American convertibles vie for space with Soviet-era Ladas.

Wander Paseo del Prado, a tree-lined pathway, and El Malecón, the seaside promenade, with tourists and locals alike, and take in this kaleidoscopic city. Admire the mish-mash of architectural styles interspersed with billboards and murals celebrating revolutionary heroes, including Che Guevara. Listen for the sounds of salsa music floating on the breeze, and join in a class if you love to dance. Smell the freshly grown tobacco during a tour of the Partagás cigar factory, then wash it all down with a minty mojito – made with Havana Club rum, of course. Be sure not to miss the faded glories of the colonial Old Town, including San Cristóbal Cathedral and several fortresses. Some of it may be crumbling after years of neglect, but revitalised efforts are restoring the city's vibrant, beating heart.

It's never been easier to visit the country, with direct flights from Europe and North America. Luxury hotel chains have set up shop in the city, with rooftop pools and top-quality restaurants just waiting for you. Havana may be shuffling into the light after a half-century of slumber, but be sure to experience it before the rest of the world alters its time-warped charm.

40 BUENOS AIRES

A city so vibrant that you can feel the ebb and flow of its cultural landscape

A match made in heaven, the skyline of Buenos Aires is a sprawling dance between magnificent colonial architecture and the scale and passion of Latin America. Everywhere the city stretches, it wrestles with stunning overgrowth, sprouting to-die-for waterfront steakhouses, stunning parks and quirky independent shopping areas, all amid a rich cultural heritage.

As traffic hurls itself down enormous motorways, past hole-in-the-wall pizzerias, an enormous portrait of Evita clings to the side of a rationalist skyscraper, smiling out over the city below. Further afield, giant Parisian-style buildings overflow with greenery, dangling over quiet streets, filled with Argentina's finest upscale brands and bistros. In the distance, passions flare over a tango-filled evening, fluttering over champagne-stained white linen.

The beating heart of the city, the looming Pirámide de Mayo obelisk juts upwards, defiantly celebrating Argentine independence. The surrounding Plaza del Mayo is buffeted alongside the iconic pink Casa Rosada, where Evita famously boomed out over a bustling crowd of supporters.

It is kept in good company, with the Catedral Metropolitana, the city's largest Catholic church, a curious architectural marvel housing the mausoleum of the hero of Argentinian independence, General José de San Martín. The city's most magnificent mausoleum, however, is Cementerio de la Recoleta, an immense graveyard brimming with elaborate stone and marble graves, statues, tombs and crypts.

Like the momentous River Plate it sits alongside, Buenos Aires stretches as far as the eye can see. However, with plazas dotted all around the city, one is never far from an artisanal coffee, sprinkled with cinnamon, with a delicious alfajor (a traditional dulce de leche confection) to keep it company.

There's no shortage of fantastic food options in Buenos Aires

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

While Buenos Aires is a safe and welcoming city, as in all major tourist destinations you should be wary of your possessions and always take stock of your surroundings.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to June or September to November for cooler weather and smaller crowds

TIME ZONE

UTC –3

USEFUL SITES

argentina.travel/en
bafreetour.com
buenostours.com

CURRENCY
$
ARGENTINE PESO

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - While much of Buenos Aires can be enjoyed on foot, the city is enormous, and visitors should select their accommodation and plan their itineraries carefully.

Public transport - Colectivo buses provide a cheap, albeit confusing, way of getting around the city. Though limited in scale, the metro can provide relief during rush hour.

FIND OUT MORE

turismo.buenosaires.gob.ar/en/article/accessible-tourism

Stretching across the horizon, Buenos Aires is an adventure across a dynamic Latin tapestry of high culture, passion and pure indulgence

The Dutch-inspired pastel-hued houses of Willemstad gaze out across Sint Anna Bay

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Tipping is customary but optional; taxi drivers, waiters and service staff can be tipped around five to ten per cent.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

February to March to experience the Curaçao Carnival.

TIME ZONE

UTC-4

USEFUL SITES

curacao.com
tourism-curacao.com
christoffelpark.org

CURRENCY
NA□
NAFL (FLORIN)

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - While most tourist hotspots are wheelchair accessible, including most of downtown Willemstad, there are exceptions – such as Shete Boka National Park and Christoffel Mountain.

Public transport - Buses are available on different routes. In addition, taxis are plentiful and fares are government regulated. However, always inquire about the cost in advance.

FIND OUT MORE

josephcares.com

41 CURACAO

Curaçao may flaunt its Dutch heritage, but has laid-back island vibes

Lying 40 miles off the coast of Venezuela, the laid-back Caribbean idyll of Curaçao is both culturally diverse and naturally picturesque. While its powdery beaches lure many a traveller, this off-the-radar atoll offers an eclectic mix of historical sites, creative quarters and wild landscapes.

A unique blend of Creole, Dutch and Spanish cultures, the feather in Curaçao's historical cap is Willemstad – a lively and cosmopolitan capital where sherbet-hued townhouses gaze out across Sint Anna Bay. While the streets of Punda are lined with art galleries and chic shops, the Pietermaai district is home to a burgeoning culinary scene and great nightlife.

Poignant and touching, the Museum Kura Hulanda, located in a 19th-century merchant's house, explores the brutal history of slavery. Exhibitions document not only the slave trade, but slave culture and abolition, alongside a sensitively curated collection of art.

At the isle's northern tip, the Christoffel National Park sprawls across 1,800 hectares. Nine hiking trails wind through the reserve, offering everything from relaxed half-day routes to challenging mountain circuits. For those who prefer four wheels, scenic driving routes criss-cross the park. While the Mountain Route passes old copper mines, underbush and orchid groves, the Northern Route hugs the coast and boasts ample avian appeal.

Banda'bou, known as Curaçao's West End, is home to the island's most scenic beaches and exotic sea life, including Shete Boka National Park. While the shoreline is punctuated with a string of limestone coves, snorkel sites are accessible from the beach. A short drive south, the white-sand beaches of Playa Porto Marie stretch ten kilometres, its tranquil waters protecting a unique double reef.

42 BELIZE

Explore both jungle and reef in this quiet corner of Central America

Though it may hold status as Central America's least-populated country, Belize still has plenty to offer those in search of the wonders of the natural world, both on land and at sea.

The Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, second only in length to the Great Barrier Reef of Western Australia, runs along the small nation's entire Caribbean coastline. Divers and snorkelers will find its waters teeming with colourful marine life, while those who don't want to get wet can still savour it from the air. Don't miss the Great Blue Hole – a marine sinkhole that drops over 100 metres into the sea bed – before returning to lounge in a beach hammock with a cocktail.

The highlands of Belize are similarly teeming with life. Walk the trails in search of jaguars and howler monkeys; keep an eye on the trees to spot some of the country's huge variety of bird species. Centuries ago, wildlife shared the jungle with bustling stone cities belonging to the Mayan civilisation – but now the ruins sit quiet and deserted. Climb the stairs to the tops of enormous pyramids and temple complexes for glorious views without the throngs of fellow tourists that crowd Mayan sites across the rest of Central America.

Such is Belize's relatively undeveloped nature that the Sky Palace at Caracol is still the country's tallest building more than a thousand years after it was built, and the ancient Mayan population would outnumber the modern residents by three to one. If you want a relaxing, laid-back trip to Central America, this is definitely the place for you.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Belize is popular with cruises, but you can also include it as part of a wider Central American tour.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

February to May, to avoid rainy and hurricane seasons.

TIME ZONE

UTC-6

CURRENCY
$
BELIZE DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

travelbelize.org
whc.unesco.org/en/list/764
ambergriscaye.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Making the most of the jungle involves climbing steps up Mayan ruins, although the walking at beach resorts will be easier.

Public transport - Several bus companies operate in Belize, with a regular service on the main routes. There is no rail network.

FIND OUT MORE

countryreports.org/travel/Belize/accessibility.htm

Belize is the only Central American country with an eastern coastline only, meaning it feels more influenced by the laid-back Caribbean than its neighbours

Each of Anguilla's 33 beaches offer their own brand of luxury

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Anguilla is a British overseas territory, so you will see a lot of British influence.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to April, to avoid the rain and hurricane seasons.

TIME ZONE

UTC-4

CURRENCY

$ EAST CARIBBEAN DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

ivisitanguilla.com
whatwedoinanguilla.com
anguilla-vacation.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Expect pavements to be uneven in places and steps to enter buildings, although most resorts will include lifts and ramps.

Public transport - There are no buses or trains on Anguilla. Most visitors either rent a car or rely on the plentiful taxis.

FIND OUT MORE

countryreports.org/travel/Anguilla/accessibility.htm

43 ANGUILLA

Experience paradise in a luxurious corner of the Caribbean

Soft white-powder sand and crystal-clear blue seas, rhythmic reggae and rum cocktails – the Caribbean islands are the tropical resort destination of choice for many travellers, and Anguilla is perhaps the most luxurious of them all.

Prepare to spend lazy days doing nothing more than sunbathing and relaxing, although the warm seas above the coral reefs will tempt snorkelers and divers who want to glimpse life beneath the waves. If that seems too much like hard work, just hop on a glass-bottomed boat. Shoal Bay is one of the best places for snorkelling, with calm seas and low current. The water in Meads Bay is a little rougher, but the beach is perfect for a romantic stroll.

For seclusion try Savannah Bay, a mile-long beach without a hotel or resort in sight, and the isolated cove of Little Bay that can only be reached by boat – get lucky and you may have it all to yourself.

Tourists who visit between April and November may not see the rich and famous who use Anguilla as a winter playground, but they do have the chance to spot the leatherback, green and hawksbill turtles that use some of the island's beaches as a nesting ground. Maundays Bay and Captains Bay provide some of the finest views, but be careful not to disturb the wild visitors.

Paradise doesn't come cheap, but prices are a little lower in the summer, and there is less need to fear the rainy season as on other Caribbean islands. If money is no object, splurge on a stay at Malliouhana, the island's original luxury resort.

ASIA

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NEPAL
25.07.2014

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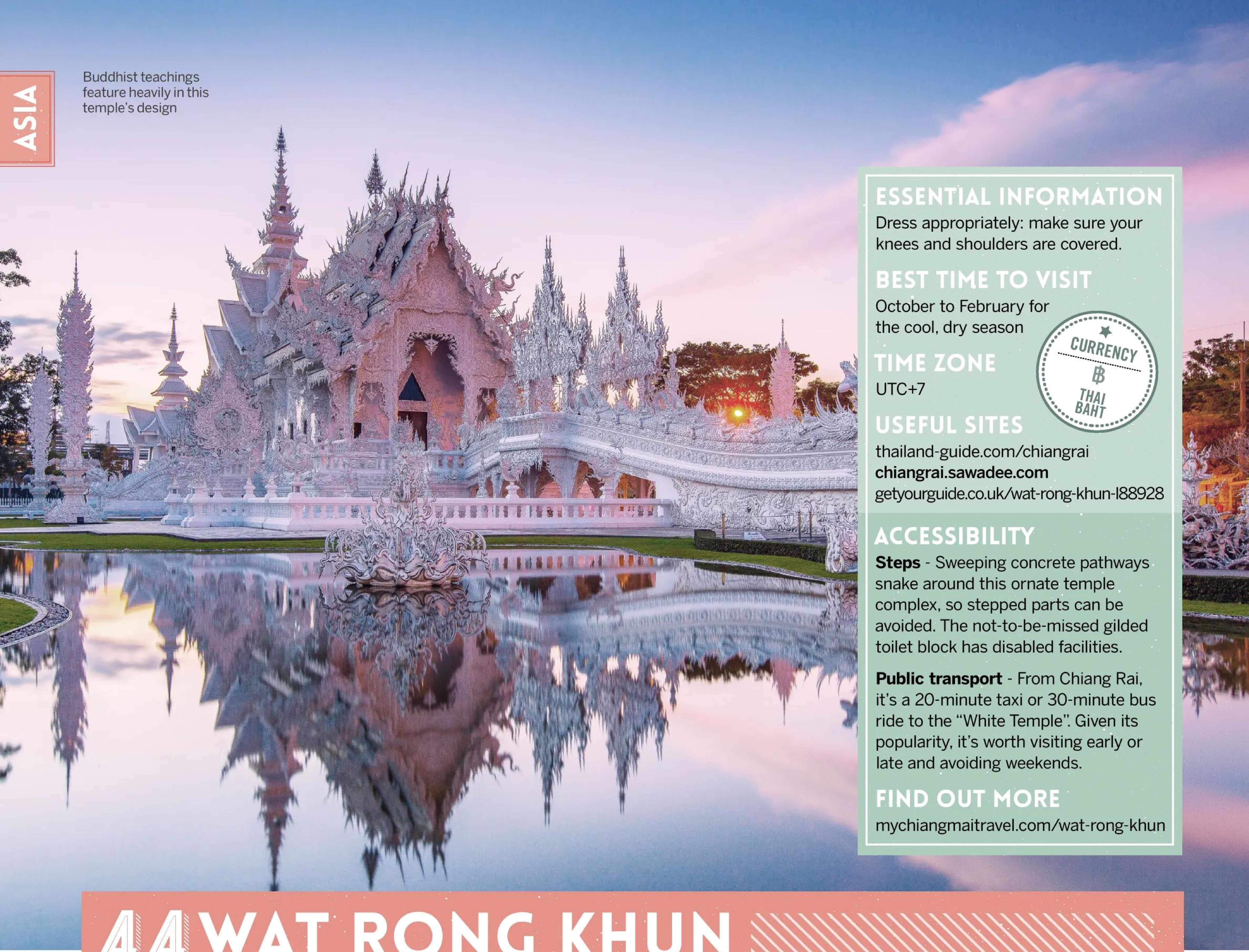


Buddhist teachings feature heavily in this temple's design

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Dress appropriately: make sure your knees and shoulders are covered.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to February for the cool, dry season

CURRENCY
฿
THAI BAHT

TIME ZONE

UTC+7

USEFUL SITES

thailand-guide.com/chiangrai
chiangrai.sawadee.com
getyourguide.co.uk/wat-rong-khun-l88928

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Sweeping concrete pathways snake around this ornate temple complex, so stepped parts can be avoided. The not-to-be-missed gilded toilet block has disabled facilities.

Public transport - From Chiang Rai, it's a 20-minute taxi or 30-minute bus ride to the "White Temple". Given its popularity, it's worth visiting early or late and avoiding weekends.

FIND OUT MORE

mychiangmaitravel.com/wat-rong-khun

44

WAT RONG KHUN

Modern art meets architecture in this unmissable temple of Thailand

As you walk over the narrow white bridge of Wat Rong Khun, you'll pass by hundreds of beseeching hands, seemingly bursting out of the ground. These unsettling sculptures symbolise desire, and visitors must cross over this sea of suffering souls to gain entrance to this unique complex. Also known as the 'White Temple', this masterpiece is the vision of Chalermchai Kositpipat, a painter famous for his use of Buddhist imagery in his work.

Unlike traditional Thai temples decorated with vibrant colours, Wat Rong Khun is stark white. According to the artist, white represents the purity of Buddha, while the glittering glass mosaics that adorn the exterior signify heavenly enlightenment and wisdom. Every inch of this intricate building carries meaning, designed to prompt people to reflect on the Buddhist teachings. The bridge, for example, represents overcoming worldly temptations and finding the path to happiness.

At the other end, you'll arrive at the 'Gate of Heaven', and beyond that lies the most important structure of any wat (temple): the ubosot. This is the main prayer room, where even more startling design features await. Instead of murals depicting scenes from Buddhist stories, there are paintings of demons interspersed with Western icons like Elvis, Neo from The Matrix and Superman, as well as Hello Kitty. There's even a depiction of the Twin Towers of the former World Trade Center, with the likeness of George W Bush and Osama bin Laden. The artist explained this inclusion was because: "I want everyone to know that our world is being destroyed by those who craved to build weapons that kill, thereby ruining the environment because nothing is ever enough."

Contrasting wildly with the white exterior is an opulent golden building. This is actually the public toilets – a comment on society's obsession with material possessions and wealth – a priceless opportunity to spend a penny in style. Aside from this, the only colour comes from the references to pop culture throughout the grounds, with the heads of Captain America and the Terminator hanging from trees. Visitors can also add their own decorations by purchasing a medallion to write their own message on and hang from one of the ornate, metal wishing trees, or alternatively throw some coins into the well inside the Pavilion.

When this extraordinary temple opened its doors in 1997, it had plenty of critics who disapproved of the break from Thai tradition. Today, it's a hugely popular destination for tourists and locals alike, and the complex is still not finished. Eventually there will be a total of nine buildings, but the facades are so detailed and demanding that construction is set to continue until 2070!

Located near Chiang Rai, you can reach the temple by bus, tuk-tuk or car. Check the opening hours before you go, and aim to get there early to beat the crowds. Photography is permitted in the grounds, but no image can capture how stunning this structure is to behold. With more than 33,000 temples in Thailand to explore, Wat Rong Khun is truly unique.

45 GOLDEN TEMPLE

Sikhism's holiest shrine, in Punjab, welcomes visitors from all walks of life

The glimmering Golden Temple in the Indian city of Amritsar stands on a platform, just above a pool of holy water, which reflects its fantastic image when still and calm. Millions of Sikhs have been visiting this site for centuries, as it is their holiest Gurdwara – a place for pilgrimage and religious reflection. But the famous Golden Temple itself is only one small part of a massive complex known as the Sri Harmandir Sahib – and it's well worth exploring in its entirety.

Sri Harmandir Sahib has seen wars, the establishment of empires, and even the bloody Partition of India. The temple has been destroyed and rebuilt a number of times – a testament to how important the place is for Sikhs. It took its current form in the 19th century, when the Maharaja Ranjit Singh rebuilt the temple after founding the Sikh Empire. In 1830, he covered the central shrine in gold foil, giving it its iconic look.

Since that time, it has been at the heart of conflict between Sikhs and other religious groups, and as recently as the 1980s it was heavily damaged by the Indian Army (sent in by Indira Gandhi). But now, the Gurdwara is once again a place of peace and quiet within the lively city of Amritsar. Following one of Sikhism's major doctrines, the temple welcomes people from all faiths, ethnicities and classes.

Within its walls, you need to make sure that you cover your head and dress respectfully. The temple offers items for you to cover up with, but if you want to take something home with you, the market stalls outside its gates sell head coverings and shawls for a relatively low price. Orange is a religiously significant colour here, so that is one of the most common colours you will see people wearing.

When you pass through the entrance gate, you'll be greeted right away with the magnificent sight of the Golden Temple. Before you head in that direction, though, a walk around the square-shaped reflecting pool is a good idea – you can see some of the other buildings that make up the large complex, such as the Akal Takht, where the central authority of modern Sikhism resides.

In the pool, you'll see men, women and children washing themselves, as Sikhs believe this water has restorative powers. By the steps going down into the water, you might see devotees meditating. Then, as you make your way towards the Golden Temple itself, there will be a long line of people queuing to get in. The sanctum contains the original Sikh scripture, which is on display so people can worship by it. The temple is small and crowded inside, but absolutely stunning, with its ceiling covered in gold foil and precious stones.

At the end of your visit, stop by the community kitchen. In most Sikh temples, they serve a humble vegetarian meal free of charge, to any and all who cross the threshold. The Harmandir Sahib is no different, and serves thousands of people every day. It's nothing fancy – the principle is that everyone eats as equals – but it is tasty, and an enriching way to immerse yourself in Sikh traditions.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Remove your shoes and wash your feet in the pools as you enter the temple.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April, for Vaisakhi, the holiest Sikh festival

CURRENCY
₹
INDIAN RUPEE

TIME ZONE

UTC+5:30

USEFUL SITES

goldentempleamritsar.org
indianholiday.com/best-of-india/monuments/golden-temple.html
sacredsites.com/asia/india/golden_temple_amritsar.html

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The temple is accessed by two small steps. It is suggested that tourists that use wheelchairs do so by hiring on-site assistance.

Public transport - Barricades prevent wheelchairs accessing Heritage Street. Amritsar rail station has lifts. Cars can also be rented from here.

FIND OUT MORE

https://bit.ly/33mbi6L

46 GREAT WALL OF CHINA

Witness the remarkable landmark that started out over 2,000 years ago

One of the most iconic sights in the entire world, a visit to the Great Wall of China constitutes the trip of a lifetime and it's located just an hour and half from Beijing – ideal for those who wish to escape the hustle and bustle of the city for a day trip.

The beginnings of the Great Wall began between the 8th and 5th centuries BCE, when different ancient Chinese states started to construct their own fortifications. This continued into the Warring States period until the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang of the Qin dynasty, connected the walls during the 3rd century BCE in order to prevent invasion from the north.

The Wall was then developed by the subsequent Han dynasty in order to protect China's flourishing Silk Road trade from opportunistic Mongols, before the Ming dynasty incorporated watchtowers and fortresses into the Wall between the 14th and 17th centuries CE to create a stronger defence, while restoring the older parts of the Wall. Some parts have crumbled over the centuries, either due to natural causes or human destruction, and most of what you see today was built by the Ming dynasty.

The Wall was known as 'the longest cemetery on Earth' because of the sheer number of workers who were killed during its construction. Stories emerged that their bodies were later buried in the Wall, although there is no evidence to suggest this is true.

Though the purpose of the Wall was to stop enemy invasions, it unfortunately failed to prevent them. The first Great Khan of the Mongol Empire, Genghis Khan, managed to breach the Wall to seize Northern China during the early 13th century. His grandson, Kublai Khan, completed the Mongol conquest of China when he defeated the Song dynasty in 1279.

The Great Wall of China stretches across northern China and southern Mongolia, and is made up of many individual sections. The most popular sections for visitors are in Jinshanling in the east, Badaling in the west, and Mutianyu, which is close to Beijing. For a peaceful section, try Huanghuacheng. Many volunteer trips take place near Beijing.

The Great Wall is perfect for hikers, with recent estimates suggesting it is roughly 21,000 kilometres (13,048 miles) long. If you can't stomach the length, the Wall can be explored at any point. Depending on the part you wish to visit, you can reach it by bus, train or car.

If you're after an adrenaline rush, the Mutianyu section of the Wall, which can be

PRESERVATION

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDS OF THE GREAT WALL

One of the biggest and oldest independent organisations for the preservation of the Great Wall, it deals with the spread of information on the Wall's condition and projects to repair it. It works with China's State Administration of Cultural Heritage to help oversee the Wall's condition. Through WildWall, they run regular volunteer trips. Email william@wildwall.com or visit the WildWall Facebook page.

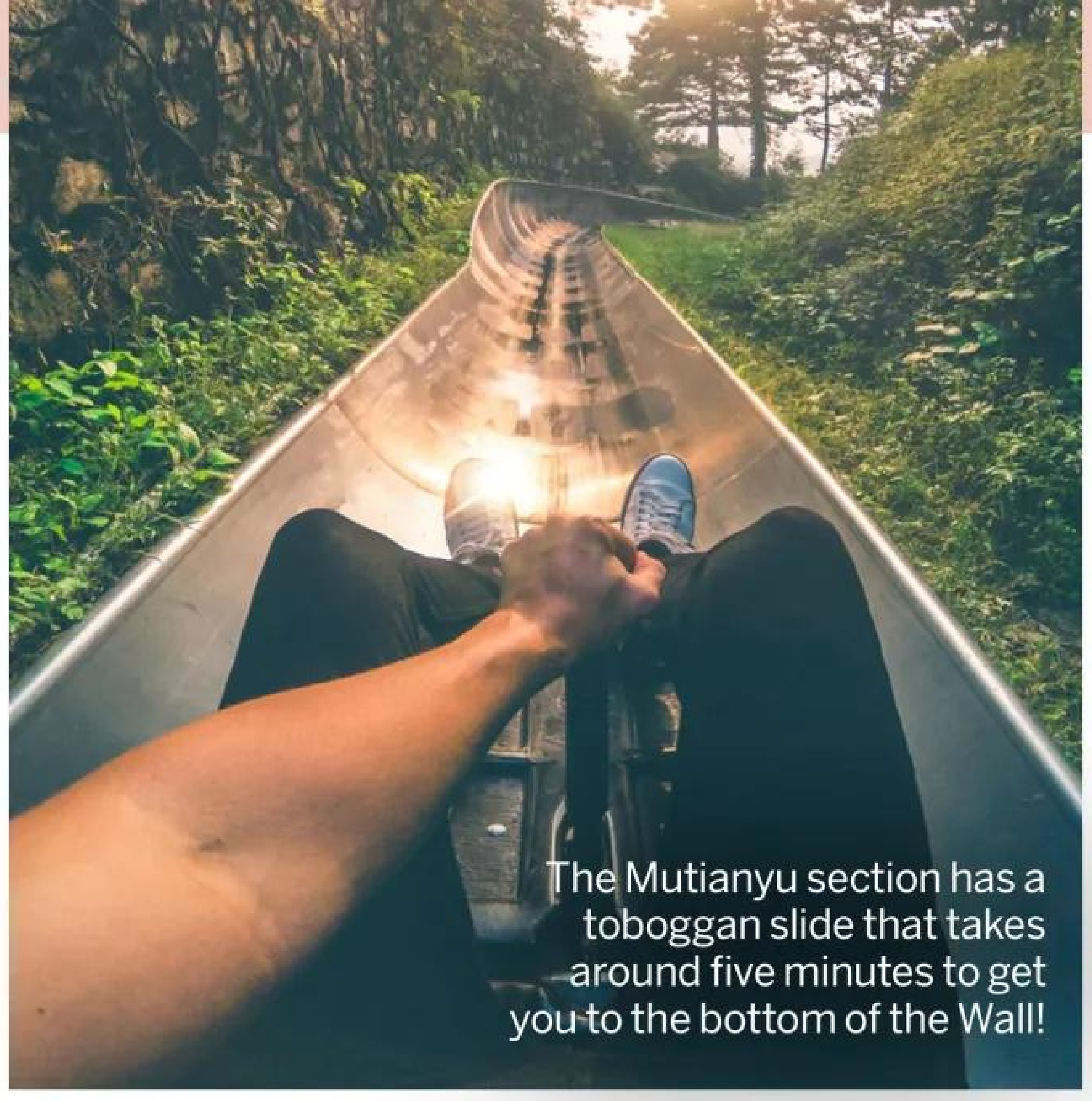
ABROAD CHINA

Abroad China's 'Clean the Great Wall of China' initiative is a conservation project that's looking for volunteers to help clean and rebuild sections of the iconic structure. As well as helping out in reconstruction efforts, there will also be opportunities to hike sections of the Wall. There will also be seminars with local experts on the history and cultural significance of the Wall. Visit www.abroadchina.net for more details.

BESPOKE TRIPS

Countless charities organise trips to the Great Wall of China, some of which involve helping with certain cleanup or restoration efforts. Keep in mind that these volunteer projects are usually quite expensive to take part in. Travel companies such as China Highlights (www.chinahighlights.com) also specialise in creating bespoke packages, including hiking both wild and restored areas of the Wall.

Ancient Terracotta soldiers guard various sections of the Great Wall



The Mutianyu section has a toboggan slide that takes around five minutes to get you to the bottom of the Wall!

reached via foot, chairlift or gondola, has a really fun toboggan slide that takes around five minutes to reach the bottom of the Wall. It is also a much quieter section of the Wall, compared to Badaling, which is usually crammed full with tourists.

The Great Wall is also one of those dream sights that can be visited during any season, depending on whether you prefer summer or winter weather – although if you want clear skies, autumn is the way to go. Millions of visitors arrive every year to look at the Wall, which is considered to be one of the New Seven Wonders of the World. With a fascinating history, the Great Wall of China is not to be missed.

A stunning aerial View of the Great Wall

IF YOU CAN'T STOMACH THE LENGTH, THE WALL CAN BE EXPLORED AT ANY POINT

The Wall can be explored at any point, so you can travel to your preferred part by bus, train or car

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Some parts of the Wall are very steep, so do your research before deciding which part you want to climb.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September to November

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

CURRENCY
¥
CHINESE RENMINBI

USEFUL SITES

www.wildchina.com
whc.unesco.org/en/list/438
www.travelchinaguide.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Although primarily accessed by stairs, a lift is available at the Badaling section of the Wall. Ramps and cable cars are also accessible. Wide walkways along the Mutianyu section also make this area step-free.

Public transport - Buses and trains run from Beijing to the Mutianyu accessible area.

FIND OUT MORE

topchinatravel.com/great-wall-of-china/access-to-great-wall-for-seniors-or-disabled-in-a-wheelchair.htm

The gate stands at the entrance to the island at 16 metres (52 feet) tall, and you can enter the island through the gate today

47 ITSUKUSHIMA SHRINE

Japan's iconic 'floating torii gate' welcomes visitors to mystical Miyajima

This 16-metre-tall (52-foot-tall) gate floating over Seto Inland Sea is steeped in history. Known as one of the 'three views of Japan', along with the pine islands of Matsushima and the sandbars of Amanohashidate, it marks the entrance of Itsukushima Shrine.

A tranquil place, Itsukushima is also known as Miyajima or 'shrine island', where 'people and gods live together', and is most famous for its eponymous Shinto buildings. The island was worshipped as a goddess, and the first shrines were built around 568 CE, but it wasn't until 1,168 CE in the Heian era that the historic Itsukushima Shrine was built by military leader Taira no Kiyomori. But still, the island was so sacred that shrines were separated from the land so as not to spoil the sacred ground. That's why the entrance torii gate, with its bold red colours were built offshore, on the sea. It is said that the rising and falling tides would help prevent the gods from damage during construction. During the 12th century, dedicated travellers from all over Japan would travel to the island by water, sailors carefully needling their vessel through the torii from Seto Inland Sea. We can only imagine the wonder they faced, encountering the shrine for the first time. Today, you can re-create their journeys by taking wonderful boat tours going through the towering torii gate at high tide, and get the same fantastic views of the island from the sea from March to November. It's customary when going through the torii to pray as you enter the gate by standing straight, bowing twice at 90-degree angles, clapping your hands at chest level twice, and finishing with a single final bow.

If you happen to arrive at low tide, don't despair! You can still get up close and personal with the gate by walking up to those magnificent pillars. You'll notice a sight that is unique to low tide: three 'mirror ponds' or kagami-ike that seem to magically appear in the sand around the shrine. It's a marvellous sight that inspired countless Japanese tanka and haiku poems.

Of course, Itsukushima Shrine is just as enchanting with its intricate and graceful Shinden-style architecture – the very same regal designs that are also used in the construction of the Imperial Palace in Kyoto. There's a delightful Noh stage, the only one in the country to rest upon the sea, stone lanterns that surround the entire island, roaming deer and two corridors that encompass the main building. The East Corridor is a beautiful vermillion, reminiscent of the torii floating outside. Its 108 ma (a Japanese word for the negative spaces in between each post) is a key feature of the minimalist architecture. The West Corridor, on the other hand, has an elaborate yet elegant Chinese gable roof called a 'kara-hafu'. Located right in the middle is a structure thatched with cypress bark and gentle curving eaves – the Main Shrine. The three Munakata goddesses are enshrined here, inside the main hall, or honden, protecting travellers across the sea and providing bountiful harvests for fishermen.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Make sure you check the high and low tide times.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

August for the Kangen-sai festival

CURRENCY
¥
JAPANESE YEN

TIME ZONE

UTC+9

USEFUL SITES

visit-miyajima-japan.com
visithiroshima.net/world_heritage/20th/itsukushima
en.itsukushimajinja.jp/route.html

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Everyone can see the torii gate, thanks to ramps from the ferry terminal to the shrine. The mountain trail is unsuitable for wheelchairs, but a cable car takes you to the top.

Public transport - Take a tram or train to wheelchair-friendly Miyajimaguchi Station, half-an-hour from central Hiroshima. From here, regular ferries run to Itsukushima island.

FIND OUT MORE

japan-accessible.com/city/hiroshima.htm

48 BADSHAHI MOSQUE

On the edge of Lahore's Walled City, you'll find the last great Mughal treasure

Lahore has long been considered the cultural capital of Punjab, the home of Mughal emperors, Sikh rulers and, later on, British colonisers. Now Pakistan's second city and historic hub, Lahore retains much of its grandeur, and the Badshahi (Emperor's) Mosque presides over it all. One of the world's biggest mosques, it's built from red sandstone and features four minarets that tower over the old city, three white marble onion domes, plus a vast square marking the entrance. Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb built the place in the 1670s, in order to commemorate his military victories over a Hindu king further south. His project was strongly influenced by the Jama Masjid mosque in Delhi, built by his predecessor Shah Jahan – the man behind the world famous Taj Mahal.

After various invasions of Lahore, the mosque was used as an army garrison – first by the Sikhs, then by the British – yet it still fell into disrepair. But the mosque has been fully restored in the past 100 years, and it's become one of Pakistan's most prominent symbols.

While it's often overshadowed by its more tourist-friendly neighbour, India, there are plenty of reasons to visit Pakistan. Recently voted the best 'unspoilt' place for backpackers to visit by a number of prolific travel outlets, tourists are beginning to recognise the latent potential in this South Asian nation. Lahore is a fantastic starting point for your trip, as it is one of the safest areas in the region, and many of its residents welcome foreign tourists with open arms.

When you cross the Badshahi Mosque's threshold, you'll pass through a grand entrance gate, heavily influenced by Persian architecture. Walking through the courtyard (which can apparently hold up to 100,000 faithful), you'll notice it is bustling with Pakistani locals and domestic tourists. You might even find that some of the more curious local children ask to take selfies with you!

Proceed to the portico, where you can admire intricately decorated white marble – it's said to be some of the finest in the world. It's carved with endlessly climbing flowers, many of which are painted vividly in pink, green, red and orange. Take a note of the gilded chandeliers dangling from the ceiling, too. Everything is perfectly symmetrical – a hallmark of Mughal design.

The prayer hall can allegedly accommodate tens of thousands of worshippers. It's particularly busy on Friday lunchtimes, as that's the time for jummah (Friday prayers). Be sure to respect the prayer rituals and dress codes.

If you can't get enough Mughal architecture, you're in luck. In the Hazuri Bagh garden – where the emperor would watch his army parade around – is an ornate pavilion, bright blue fountains, and plenty of green, grassy spaces. You'll also find the tomb of poet Allama Iqbal, one of Pakistan's most definitive writers.

For the best view of the mosque, get a rooftop table in Lahore's famous 'food street' and enjoy a hearty Pakistani meal while watching the sun go down over the domes and minarets. The mosque, along with the neighbouring Lahore Fort, is beautifully lit up at night, and makes for a truly stunning evening vista.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Apply for your Pakistani visa up to three months in advance.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to December (the weather will be ideal for sightseeing)

TIME ZONE

UTC+5

CURRENCY
Rs
PAKISTANI RUPEE

USEFUL SITES

pakistantoursguide.com/badshahi-mosque.html

gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/pakistan

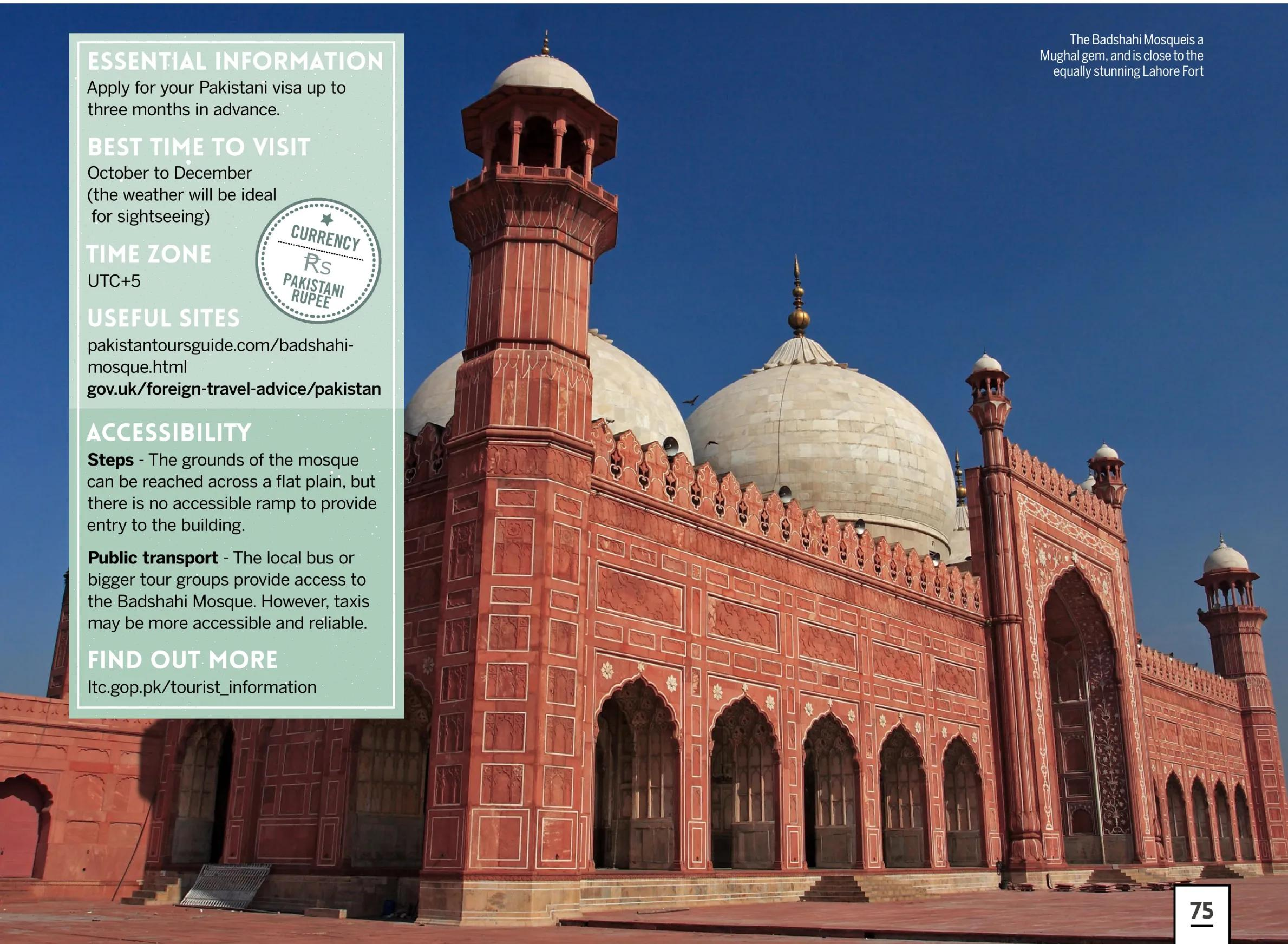
ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The grounds of the mosque can be reached across a flat plain, but there is no accessible ramp to provide entry to the building.

Public transport - The local bus or bigger tour groups provide access to the Badshahi Mosque. However, taxis may be more accessible and reliable.

FIND OUT MORE

ltc.gop.pk/tourist_information



The Badshahi Mosqueis a Mughal gem, and is close to the equally stunning Lahore Fort

49 MUMBAI

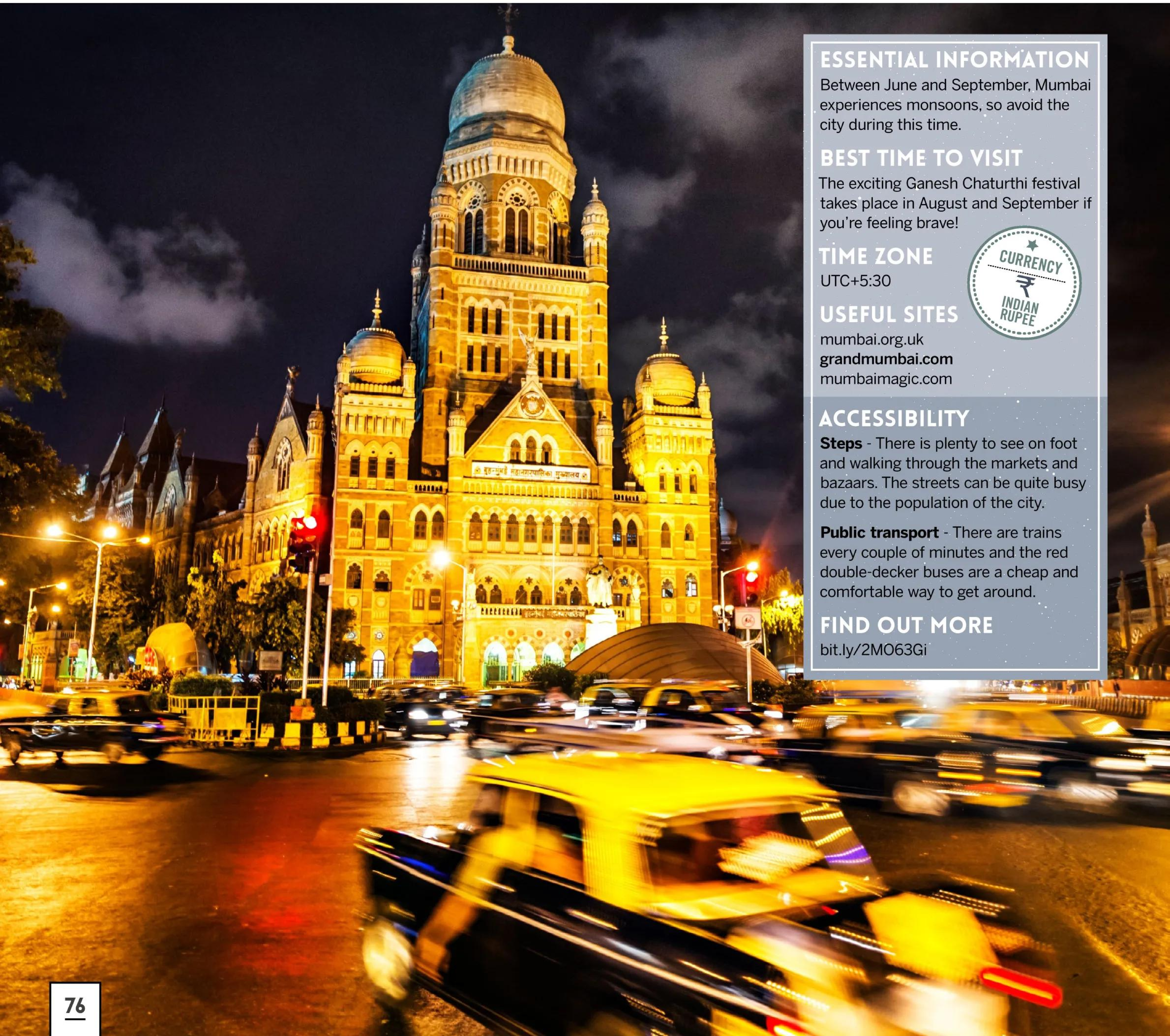
Take in all the sights, sounds and smells of India's most vibrant city

There's nowhere else in the world quite like Mumbai. Nowhere else in the world will you find so many 'opposites' all under the roof of a single city: heritage buildings meet modern skyscrapers; expensive homes stand tall next to sprawling slums; stray dogs roam below exotic birds; servants work alongside prosperous business people. Mumbai is a unique place.

Arriving by train, you'll immediately be greeted with one of Mumbai's most iconic landmarks: the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus. If you're going to visit any train station in India – and no trip to the country is complete without doing so – this UNESCO World Heritage Site is the one to choose. Located in the Fort precinct of Mumbai, it showcases High Victorian Gothic as well as Indian architecture, and is the perfect cultural blend of Indian and colonial designs.

There are reminders of the British Raj and colonial influences everywhere you look in Mumbai. Even the city's most recognisable monument, the Gateway of India, was built to commemorate the visit of King George V and Queen Mary in 1911. Completed in 1924 and located in the Apollo Bunder area of south Mumbai, the waterfront arch stands tall at 26 metres high and overlooks the harbour, welcoming visitors as they approach the southern part of the city by boat. It's a sight you wouldn't want to miss when in Mumbai. Step through the Gateway and you'll be greeted by commemorative statues of important Indian figures, street vendors and even more architectural marvels, including the Taj Mahal Palace – one of India's finest hotels. Offering both luxury and a taste of history, it's directly opposite the Gateway and well worth a visit.

The Gateway is also the perfect place from which to explore the ancient, rock-cut Elephanta Caves, since its surrounding jetties offer ferry trips to Elephanta Island just ten kilometres



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Between June and September, Mumbai experiences monsoons, so avoid the city during this time.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

The exciting Ganesh Chaturthi festival takes place in August and September if you're feeling brave!

TIME ZONE

UTC+5:30

CURRENCY
₹
INDIAN RUPEE

USEFUL SITES

mumbai.org.uk
grandmumbai.com
mumbaimagic.com

ACCESSIBILITY

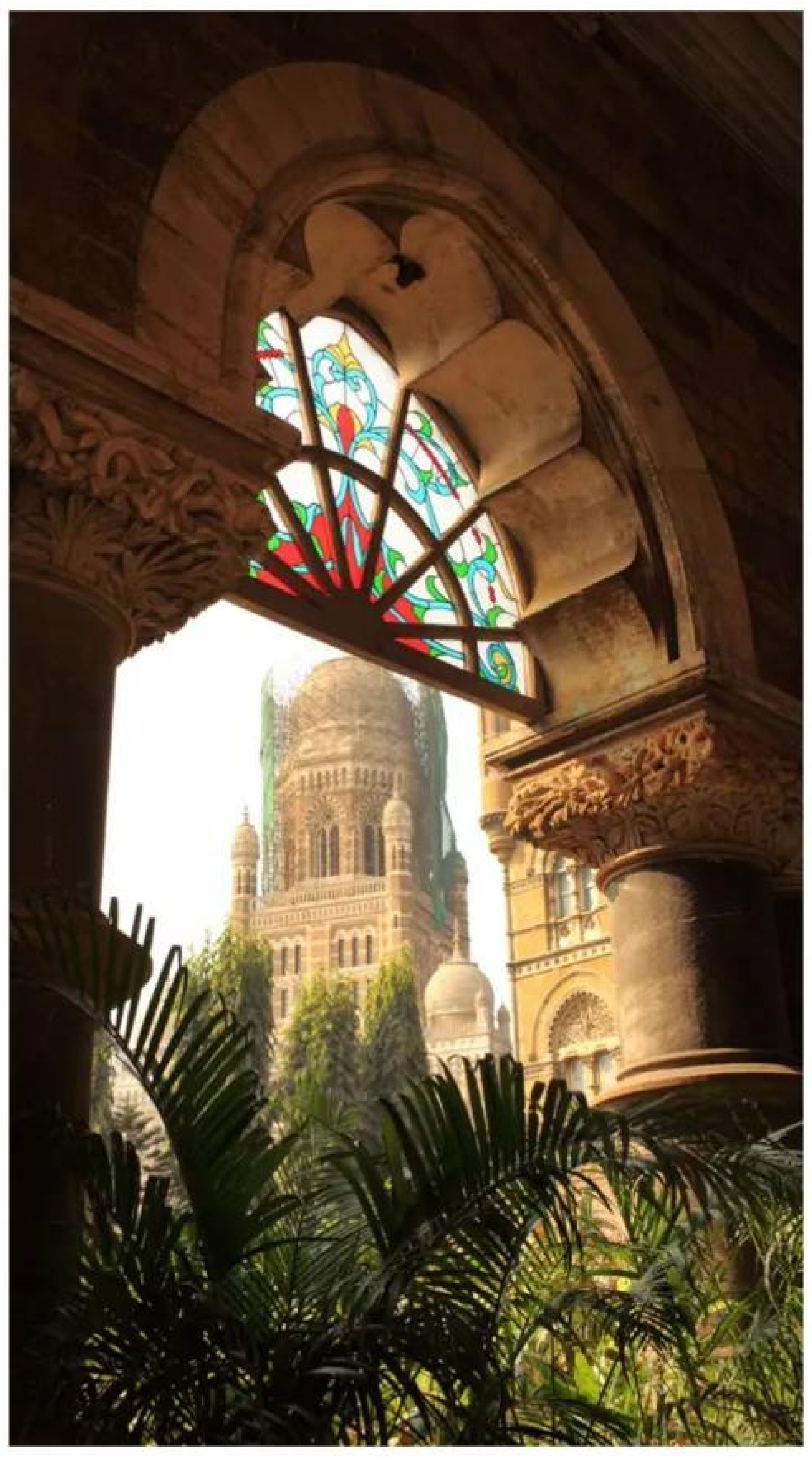
Steps - There is plenty to see on foot and walking through the markets and bazaars. The streets can be quite busy due to the population of the city.

Public transport - There are trains every couple of minutes and the red double-decker buses are a cheap and comfortable way to get around.

FIND OUT MORE

bit.ly/2MO63Gi

FAMOUS NAGORI DAIRY
Bademiya
MINARA MASJID



BEFORE YOU LEAVE MUMBAI, YOU'LL WANT TO SAMPLE BOLLYWOOD IN ALL ITS GLORY

away, where the caves are located. Becoming a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, it is believed by many that the cave temples date back to the 5th century CE. The five Hindu caves, plus two Buddhist ones, house some impressive sculptures, some of which are now in ruins. Unfortunately it's not possible to stay on the forest-covered island overnight, but a day trip is really all you need to admire the heritage on display.

Before leaving south Mumbai, check out the heritage and art district of Kala Ghoda in downtown Mumbai. The crescent-shaped precinct has art galleries, heritage buildings, museums and much more. Whether you choose to explore the buildings themselves, or browse the pavement art stalls and creative spaces as you pass through, this cultural hub with its hip cafes and popular restaurants is a contrast to the hustle and bustle of the rest of the city.

Further up in central Mumbai is the magnificent Haji Ali Dargah, which is both a mosque and a tomb. Built in 1431 in memory of wealthy Muslim merchant Sayed Peer Haji Ali Shah Bukhari, who made an important pilgrimage to Mecca, the landmark is located on an islet off the coast of Worli, and can only be accessed via a walkway during low tide.

Now you're spoilt for choice when it comes to bazaars to mooch around in Mumbai, but if you only have time for one, make sure it's Chor Bazaar. Literally meaning 'thieves' market', it got its name after some of Queen Victoria's belongings went missing when one of her ships docked in the city's harbour. Supposedly they were later found for sale in the bazaar. Located near Bhendi Bazaar in south Mumbai, you'll find everything from vintage clocks to antique furniture. And if you believe the legend, perhaps you'll even locate some of your own belongings there should anything go missing while you're in the city!

If you want to escape the noise and grime of the city's bazaars, hawkers and general chaos, we recommend you either head to the densely forested Sanjay Gandhi National Park, located between the suburbs of Mumbai and Thane, or make your way to Juhu Beach, north of the city centre. The national park will spoil you with an abundance of flora and fauna – a literal breath of fresh air from the pollution of the city – whereas the popular beach destination in affluent Juhu is perfect for unwinding and watching the Sun set over the Arabian Sea with locals and tourists alike.

Before you leave the incredible city of Mumbai altogether, you'll want to sample a little bit of Bollywood in all its glory! Whether it's simply catching the latest Bollywood movie at the cinema and becoming part of a lively Indian audience, or going on a full-blown Bollywood experience, there are tours galore. And there's nowhere better to enjoy the iconic song-and-dance fusion than in its birthplace.

© Getty

50 CHIANG MAI

Thailand's Chiang Mai is a celebration of tradition and contemporary culture

Set amid the mountains and rainforests of northern Thailand, the coolest part of the country (literally and figuratively), is Chiang Mai. Once the capital of the Lanna Kindgom, which ruled northern Thailand for half a millennium, it is today the country's second-largest city, sitting along the border of Myanmar, surrounded by hill tribe villages.

At its heart is the Old Town, a striking example of traditional Thai architecture, contained within a moat and a rare example of extant city walls. The sleepy centre makes for remarkable walking, through the eastern Tapae Gate and into Wat Chiang Man, the city's oldest Buddhist temple – built in 1296 by the first Lanna king, Mangrai. A classic example of Lanna architecture, it boasts a chedi, or stupa, held up by an elaborate group of stoic elephant buttresses.

One of the city's most beautiful temples is Wat Phra Singh, 'The Temple of the Lion Buddha', hosting hundreds of monks and novices. The 14th-century monastery's assembly hall makes a lavish display of power – with a teak exterior, adorned with ornamental accoutrements in gold and ochre. Inside, walls feature elegant murals, depicting local and Buddhist folklore, leading up to a rear wall of red lacquer and gold leaf. Here sits the highly venerated Phra Singh Lion Buddha, which is paraded through the city every April during the Thai New Year festival, Songkran, when revellers sprinkle it with water.

Though the nearby Wat Chedi Luang is not the largest temple in the area, it boasts a magnificent chedi (pagoda), which stood as Chiang Mai's tallest structure, at 85 metres (279 feet), until an earthquake knocked it down to 60 metres (197 feet). Commissioned by King Saen Muang Ma to hold his father's ashes, it took a century to build, and once housed the Emerald Buddha – the country's most revered icon.

At the edge of the Old Town, Somphet Market sizzles up local snacks. Beyond is a plethora of cafes, art galleries and modern restaurants, representing the simultaneous embrace of tradition and modernity that has transformed Chiang Mai into a tantalising foodie and coffee-lovers' destination. Centred around Nimmanhaemin Road is the city's capital of 'cool', awash with antiques, handcrafts, boutiques and Instagrammable cafes – such as Gongdee, which fuses furniture, art and design with a strong brew.

Just outside the city, the Baan Kang Wat artists' village unites traditional and modern architecture, enveloped in greenery. Its eccentric vendors sell local, organic and sustainable goods, alongside hair salons, a library cafe and yoga studios – many of which offer workshops for those eager to learn pottery and other crafts.

Chiang Mai has become a haven for the hungry-minded, providing a gorgeous natural backdrop for an endless array of courses, workshops and retreats. May Kaidee's Cooking School, which started in Bangkok in 1988, teaches visitors about Thai cuisine, and how to make various traditional dishes, using only vegetarian or vegan ingredients. Meanwhile, Sammy's Organic Thai Cooking School lets aspiring chefs choose which dishes they want to learn, on a farm outside the city. Others like to delve deeper into some of the other Thai arts, such as Muay Thai. Drawing upon traditional Thai Medicine, the Old Medicine Hospital teaches visitors how to deliver a

Chiang Mai's mountainous surroundings and gorgeous religious history attracts visitors from all over the world

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

When visiting hill tribes, be sure to choose an ethical tour operator.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to February (for cool, dry weather) or April to October (to avoid the crowds)

TIME ZONE

UTC+7

CURRENCY
฿
THAI BHAT

USEFUL SITES

tourismthailand.org
travelhubchiangmai.com
guesthouse-chiangmai.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Night markets and shopping areas are generally step free. Some temples assist wheelchair users, but not in the Old City.

Public transport - The primary mode of transport is "red cars" – a type of taxi-come-bus. These are accessible with assistance.

FIND OUT MORE

payvand.com/news/05/apr/1192.html

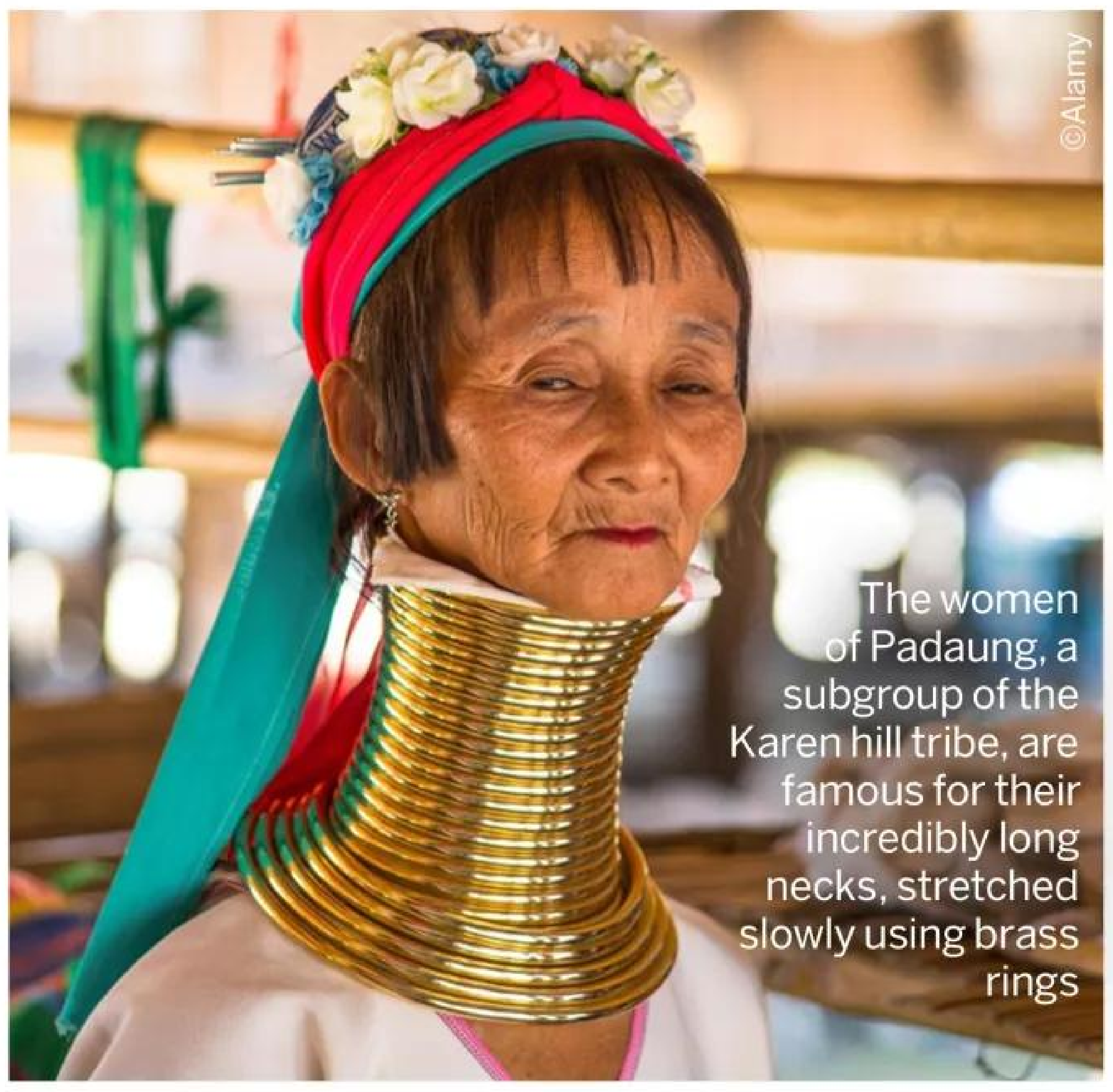
The 14th-century Wat Phra Singh, home to hundreds of monks and trainees, is an elegant symbol of Lanna prestige

back-walking Thai massage – without sending anyone to hospital. Alternatively, you can receive a cheap (but excellent) massage from a reformed female ex-convict, as part of their reintegration into society.

Chiang Mai is also a beacon for thirsty spiritual wanderers, with a wide variety of yoga, wellness and energy-healing schools, courses and teachers. With the city surrounded by beautiful temples, it is a natural lighthouse for the soul. From shamanistic healing to yoga, there are myriad outlets spread across the region. An hour outside the city, The Pavana Resort hosts a whole range of retreats, orientated around detoxification, healthy eating, exercise, breathing and clearing the mind.

Elsewhere, Origin Thailand features a reconstructed traditional village, where guests can delve deeper into Thai etiquette, music, dance, flower arrangement and textiles. Back in the city, contemporary jewellery shop Nova also offers classes in Chiang Mai's art of silversmithing. On Saturday nights, Wualai Road, once known for its silver and lacquer workshops, turns into a bright, colourful market – a favourite walking trail among city-break pilgrims. A larger, one-kilometre (0.6-mile) market, complete with bars and food vendors, runs on Sundays between Tha Phae Gate and Ratchadamnoen Road, but this gets far busier.

The city's Saturday Night Market makes for an exciting, yet manageable, walking experience, among a symphony of colours, sights and smells

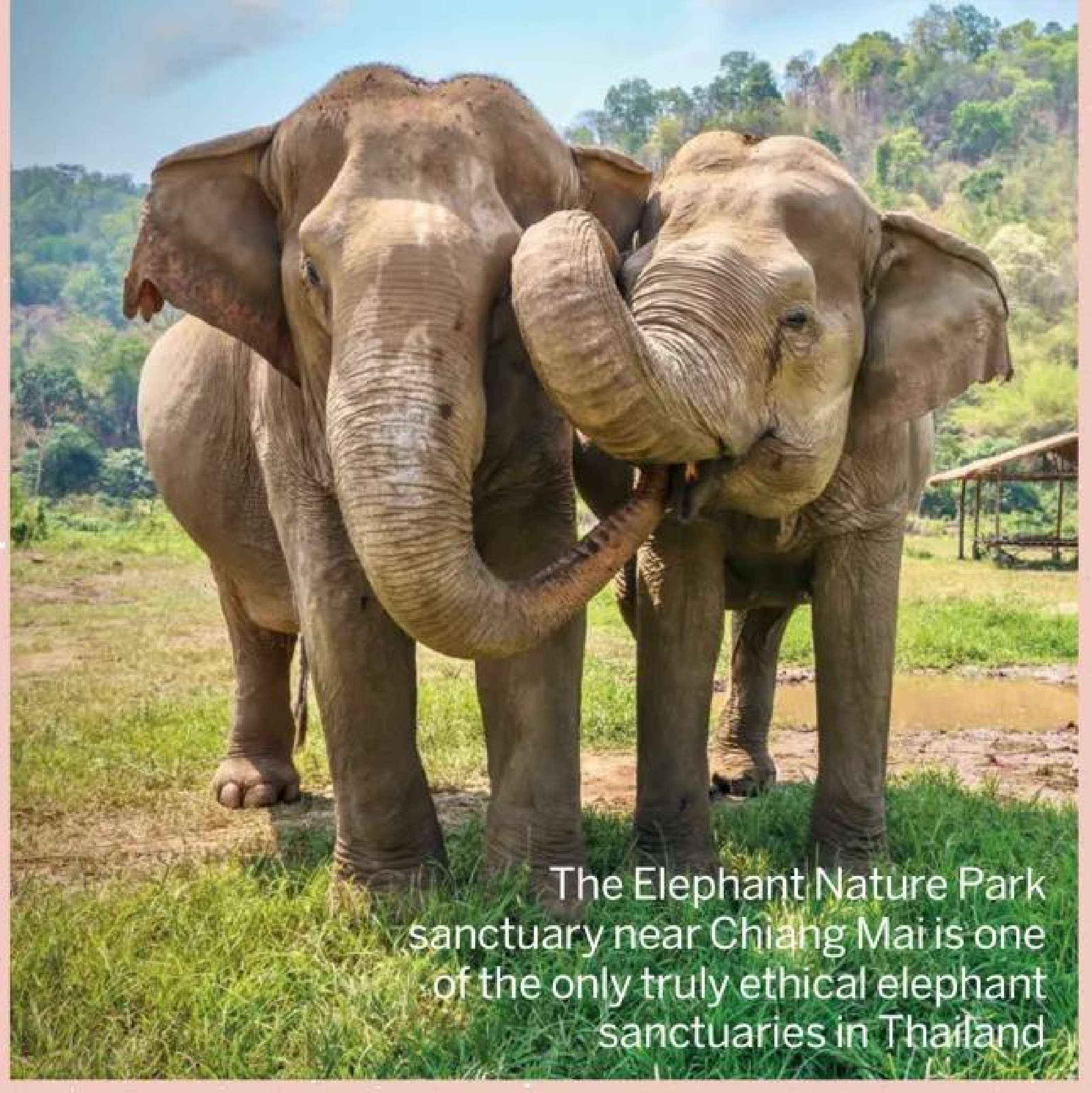


©Alamy

The women of Padaung, a subgroup of the Karen hill tribe, are famous for their incredibly long necks, stretched slowly using brass rings

Though dizzying, Chiang Mai's oldest bazaar, Talat Warorot, is a treasure trove of surprises – from daily essentials and cooking utensils to delicious treats and trinkets. Set beside the Talat Ton Lam Yai flower market, it rests against the Ping River, which was once used to bring in local produce. The river can be navigated by kayak, scorpion-tailed boat or even a dinner cruise, with a quick expedition of a local riverside farmhouse, growing fruits, herbs and flowers.

Adrenaline-addicted adventurers need not feel left out, with white-water rafting down the Pai River complemented with a zipline through the rainforest. Those who prefer the company of birds and waterfalls will enjoy hikes through Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Doi Chiang Dao and Doi Inthanon National Park – home to Thailand's tallest mountain, with a modern temple sat atop.



The Elephant Nature Park sanctuary near Chiang Mai is one of the only truly ethical elephant sanctuaries in Thailand

ETHICAL ELEPHANTS

Thailand is a wonderful country, but it's not known for its animal welfare record. You'll see elephant rides being offered everywhere you go. While the smiling tourists sitting atop these friendly beasts may think it's just harmless fun, nothing could be further from the truth. Elephants are tortured from a young age, to make them submissive to human commands – and the tourist industry thrives on it.

Thankfully, there is hope for these wonderful creatures. Chiang Mai is home to the world famous Elephant Nature Park, which is one of few genuinely ethical sanctuaries in Thailand. The park's founder, Lek Chailert, rescues elephants from the logging, tourism, and agricultural industries. Unfortunately, they cannot be released back into wild, but this haven of tranquility and love is the next best thing.

If you pay a visit, you can take lots of fantastic photos of these amazing animals, and walk with them through the jungle. One day may not be enough, but don't worry – you can volunteer here for up to a week.

Aside from natural beauty, Chiang Mai is surrounded by hill tribe villages, migrated from various parts of China and South East Asia. The largest group, the Karen, are refugees from Myanmar. Women from the Karen subgroup, the Padaung, are instantly recognisable by their incredibly long necks, stretched slowly with a series of heavy brass rings. Many even have blackened or rotten teeth, from chewing betel.

For those really looking to go off the grid and immerse themselves in a forgotten culture, homestays are available. The Chai Lai Sisters Karen Homestay remains a comfortable compromise, with limited electricity courtesy of solar panels, and profits going towards a charity for at-risk ethnic minority and refugee women. After an extensive exploration of the city, it could be argued, there's no better way to immerse in the region's natural wonders, culture and hospitality than a night under the stars in the middle of the rainforest.

ASIDE FROM NATURAL BEAUTY, CHIANG MAI IS SURROUNDED BY HILL TRIBE VILLAGES

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

While not all trains stop in Bentota, Aluthgama is incredibly well-connected.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to March
(for dry-season weather)

TIME ZONE

UTC+5:30

USEFUL SITES

samanvilla.com
srilanka.travel
srilankawatersports.com

CURRENCY
Rs
SRI LANKAN RUPEE

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Most resorts are a short walk from the beautiful beaches. There are tuk tuk services available to cover slightly longer distances.

Public transport - Bentota has a small station with trains connecting to Kalutara and Galle. There are also air-conditioned bus services. Both are inexpensive ways to travel.

FIND OUT MORE

srilankatravelitinerary.com/disabled-accessible-travel.html

51 BENTOTA

Bentota features endless beaches uncorrupted by traditional trappings

Broad sandy beaches run alongside a frame of thick foliage and paddy fields, quiet enough for one to hear bird calls and the whirring of bicycle wheels against a soundtrack of lapping waves. Despite an abundance of beautiful hotels and resorts, Bentota strikes a rare balance: a tropical paradise, with comfort and luxury in all the right places.

Just a two-hour drive south from Colombo, Bentota's strict building regulations have left its beaches largely clear of bars and restaurants. Intersected with a colourful railway, it is a place that sacrifices convenience and crowds for the sake of splendour and tranquillity.

A careful selection of small boutique hotels and opulent resorts, sprawled along the southern beach, cater to the varying whims of adventurers, hippies and families alike. Perhaps most notably is the hallmark style of renowned Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa, whose hotels (such as Lunuganga, Club Villa and Villa Bentota) have breathed a touch of contemporary design into the natural landscape – a form often called 'tropical modernism'.

To the north is Aluthgama, a small town boasting a little more bustle, in the form of stalls and a fish market. It sits on the mouth of Bentota River, opposite a thin strip of land, known as Paradise Island. Staring out over the crystalline Laccadive Sea, this is Bentota's go-to hub for watersports – a bonanza of fishing trips, jet skiing, deep-sea fishing, banana boats and windsurfing – not to mention lagoon trips.

A river safari takes you past crocodiles, water monitors, chameleons, more than 100 types of bird and other critters hiding in the mangroves. Elsewhere, the Induruwa Sea Turtle Conservation Centre looks after endangered sea turtles, and you can watch them hatch.

The river feeds into Dedduwa Lake, overlooked by the 12th-century Galapatha Raja Temple, home to some truly curious Buddhist relics – such as the canine tooth of Buddha's disciple, Kasyapa – within a 2,500-year-old stupa. The lake is also the site of Geoffrey Bawa's country home, Lunuganga Estate. Bawa spent half a century transforming the rubber estate into a landscaped garden, his very own experimental canvas – which remains a stunning testament to his philosophy, life and works.

His brother, Bevis Bawa, who began his working life as a planter on a rubber estate, curated his own magnificent garden at the nearby Brief Garden – a two-hectare (five-acre) madcap jungle masterpiece north of the river. He, too, spent 40 years playing with form and space, producing one of Asia's most beloved gardens, which features sculptures, artwork and antique furniture.

For a change of pace, set between Bentota's river and beach is the bazaar, an eclectic market hawking local trinkets, textiles, carved woodwork and brassware. Just to the south is the Ranra Tea Centre, a colonial-style estate serving up piping-hot brews of its signature Ceylon tea on the picturesque veranda.

While Bentota remains a sleepy paradise for most of the year, at the end of December visitors are treated to the annual Buddhist festival, Perahera. During the celebrations, the town is overrun by fire jugglers, musicians, dancers, elephants and torch bearers.

52 HONG KONG

From busy Kowloon to serene Lantau Island, Hong Kong is full of surprises

Since the First Opium War of 1842, Hong Kong has remained a land of promise and adventure, first as a vibrant British trading post, and now a Chinese special administrative region. At its heart, it is a vibrant megacity, with a distinct architectural heritage immortalised by virtually every fictional cyberpunk metropolis – from Blade Runner to Ghost in the Shell.

Its distinctive skyline forms a corridor along southern Kowloon's Tsim Sha Tsui Promenade, where a 44-metre (144-foot) high clock tower memorialises the region's colonial past, beside the Avenue of Stars, paying tribute to the giants of Hong Kong cinema. Further inland, Nathan Road forms the spine of an eclectic mish-mash of high-end luxury stores, enthusiastic restauranteurs, Bollywood-themed merchandise hawkers and Shanghainese tailors.

In the adjacent area of Yau Ma Tei is Temple Street, home not only to a Tin Hau temple, but the Night Market, a sprawling assortment of vendors and traders, featured in many a film. Street food is in no short supply, with delicious, piping-hot noodles and fresh seafood on hand to rejuvenate weary shoppers for a second wind of haggling for bargains.

Just north, in what was once the triad heartland of Mong Kok is the Ladies' Market, awash with inexpensive clothes for both women and men, as well as gadgets, gizmos and all manner of knick-knacks. While the nearby Tung Choi Street features an array of Chinese pubs, on the opposite side of Victoria Harbour, Wan Chai is marked by its distinct colonial-style bars – a short trip from the upmarket restaurants, art galleries and antique shops tucked along the historic streets of SoHo.

The city's most exclusive postcode, The Peak, is aptly named, whether enjoyed aboard the charming Peak Tram (which has run since 1888) or from 428 metres (1,404 feet) above sea level atop Peak Tower. The area offers a vantage point to reflect on the island's fascinating history.

However, there is much more to Hong Kong than just the hustle and bustle of the city. In the east and northeast, New Territories is Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark, a marvel of the natural world, with hexagonal and twisted volcanic columns crawling upwards, alongside a coastline of volcanic rock.

At Central Star Ferry Pier, visitors can catch a ride out to Hong Kong's southern Islands District. From the outdoorsy hiking trails, beach barbecues and rolling hills of Lamma Island to the bun-snatching festival of the tiny Cheung Chau, each of these laid-back isles is a testament to Hong Kong's natural beauty and time-honoured traditions.

Hidden within the verdant mountains of Hong Kong's largest outlying island, Lantau, Po Lin Monastery is given away by a curious landmark – the enormous 34-metre (112-foot) tall, bronze 'Big Buddha'. A pilgrimage site for Buddhists across Asia, the statue sits atop 268 steps, with a peaceful garden and a vegetarian restaurant to boot. Elsewhere, 38 monuments are aligned in an infinity pattern, adorned with the Heart Sutra in Chinese calligraphy – forming Wisdom Path. On the western side of the island is Tai O Fishing Village, a rare collection of traditional houses on stilts, with a fresh fish market, cafés and restaurants to enjoy.

Victoria Harbour, originally known as 'Fragrant Harbour', has long remained the city's lifeline

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The pre-paid Octopus card is accepted by public transport, grocery stores and vending machines alike.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to December (for dry, cool weather), or January to February (to enjoy Chinese New Year)

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

CURRENCY

$ US DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

skybird.com.hk
discoverhongkong.com
tar.gov.hk/eng/about/index.html

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - There is much to explore on foot, with many guided walking tours. Hong Kong is very pedestrian friendly with well-maintained streets.

Public transport - The Mass Transit Railway (MTR) gives access to most tourist destinations, and buses serve the few places not accessible by train.

FIND OUT MORE

discoverhongkong.com/uk/plan-your-trip/traveller-info/accessible-hong-kong.jsp

53 HA LONG BAY

It's easy to see why folk tales attribute Ha Long Bay to divine creation

The wind throws rain through the early morning fog. Giant sculptures rise from turquoise water, upright, as though they could topple at any moment. Suddenly, the skies open up, the sun breaks through and, for a moment, looking over the ship's deck is like staring into the kiln of creation itself.

Long ago, according to legend, the ancient Vietnamese faced constant seaborne invasions from the north. The gods grew so displeased at their plight, the Mother Dragon was sent to help, alongside her children. In the heat of battle, the dragons incinerated the enemy, spitting out numerous jewels, which formed a defensive barrier – forever fortifying the country against northern attackers. These jewels, it is said, later formed into the karsts and isles that now litter the coast of Ha Long Bay.

When UNESCO appointed the seascape of roughly 1,600 islands a World Heritage Site, it was not in recognition of divine origin, but outstanding beauty and great biological interest. However, at first glance, the mythical explanation does not seem so far-fetched.

Voted one of the 'New7Wonders of Nature', Ha Long Bay and neighbouring Bai Tu Long Bay and La Han Bay are characterised by dreamy limestone isles scattered through the aquamarine sea like monoliths from the heavens. The karsts are overrun with lush vegetation, filled with 59 mysterious caves, ripe for exploration.

Though Ha Long Bay is far from secluded, it is home to Sung Sot Cave, nicknamed 'Surprising Cave'. A natural museum of geological formation, it reveals a chasmic grotto of stalactites and stalagmites, embellished with dramatic lighting. The bay's largest cave, it stretches 200 metres (656 feet) long into Bo Hon Island and is, at points, 80 metres (262 feet) wide.

Also nearby is Ti Top Island, home to not only a large stretch of beach, but various hotels, restaurants, bars and luxury resorts. Nestled at the top of the island, named after Russian cosmonaut Gherman Titov, is a spectacularly placed viewing platform – offering truly panoramic views of the ethereal landscape. Many water babies enjoy using the island as a leaping-off point for snorkelling and kayaking expeditions; others come here simply for a spot of sunbathing.

Luxury and mid-range cruises are perhaps the easiest way to enjoy the bay. Journeys tend to span one or two nights, with on-board cooking classes, sunrise tai chi sessions, late-night drinking bouts and even on-board saunas. They also stop off at Tung Sau Pearl Farm and Huang Thang Commune, the largest floating fishing village in the bay.

However, it is also possible to explore the far quieter Bai Tu Long Bay, where the water is less polluted and more suited for swimming. With stops at Cap La and Tra San islands, it's possible to enjoy a more leisurely pace, and even a spot of night-time squid fishing, for those who are so inclined. While mid-range cruises may not offer

LIMESTONE ISLES SCATTER THROUGH THE AQUAMARINE SEA LIKE MONOLITHS

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The Ha Long Bay entrance fees are set to rise in 2019, ranging from roughly £8/$10 to £25/$32.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Spring, from March to May, and autumn, from September to November

TIME ZONE

UTC+7

CURRENCY
₫
VIETNAMESE DONG

USEFUL SITES

vietnamtourism.com
ethnictravel.com.vn
www.bhayagroup.com

ACCESSIBILITY

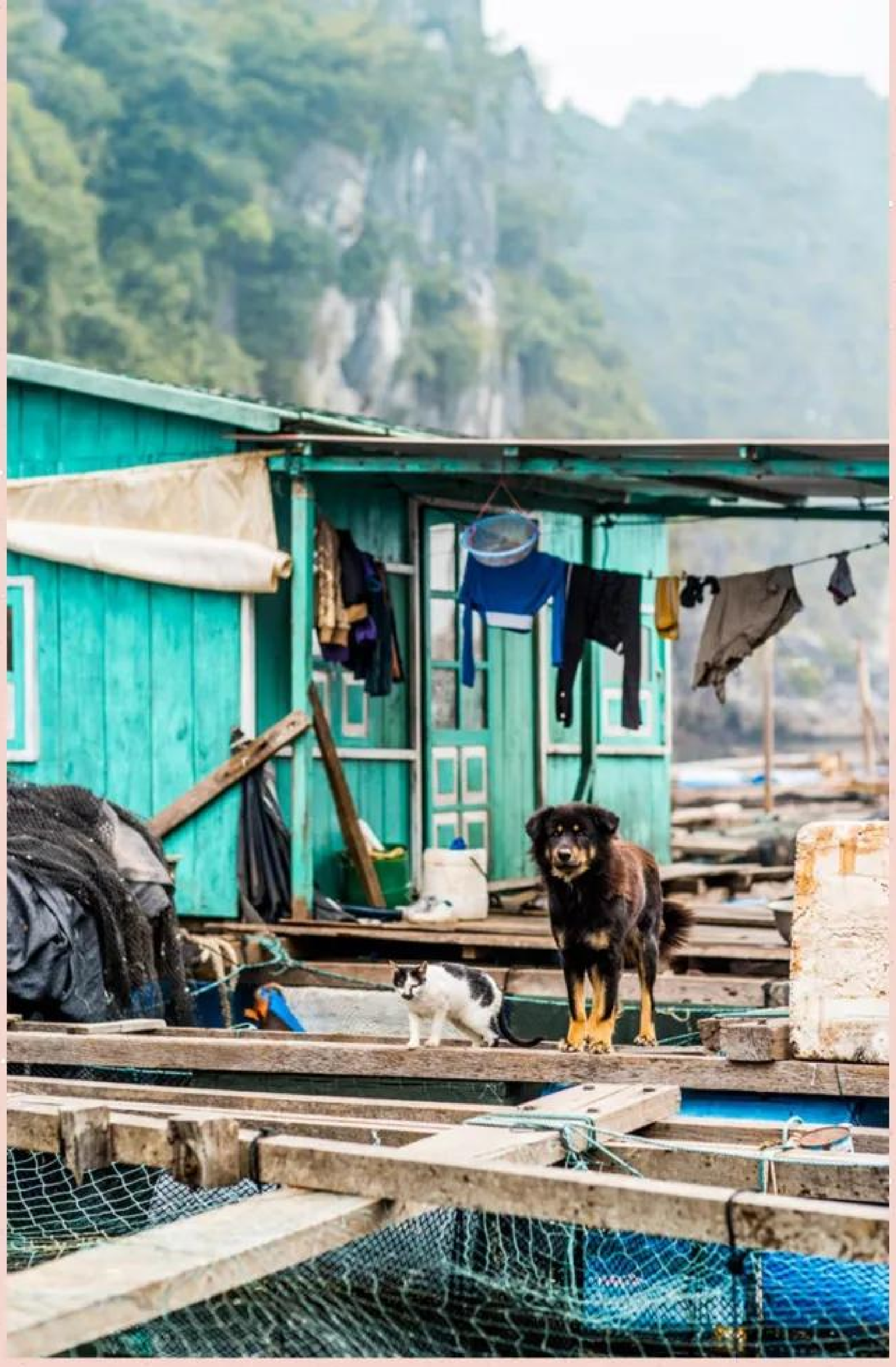
Steps - Boat tours are the best way to get around, but there are steps to some of the docks and in the caves. The caves can be a little slippery.

Public transport - As well as tours from Hanoi, you can reach Ha Long by minibus, an open bus or even seaplane. There is also the option of cargo train.

FIND OUT MORE

atvyyc.net/2017/12/02/boating-ha-long-bay-vietnam/

Between the limestone isles and the rustic junks, Ha Long Bay truly is a dreamscape

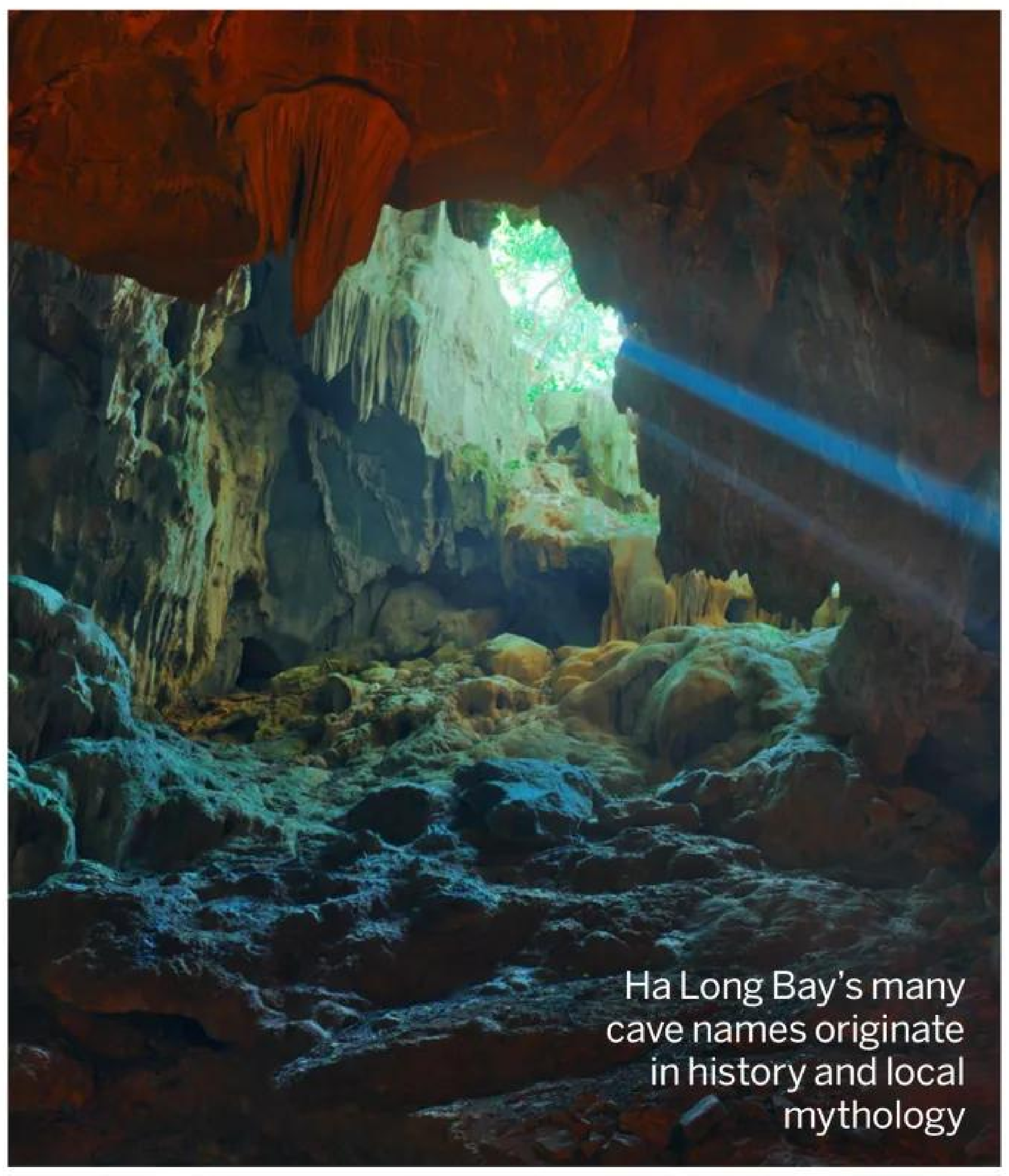


FLOATING FISHING VILLAGES

While more than 200,000 people live in the province of Ha Long, roughly 1,000 of them call the waters of Ha Long Bay itself their home. Their 400 wooden houseboats are spread across three main floating villages, which bob atop the crystalline water, a monument of historic life.

Though Ha Long Bay has been inhabited for 18,000 years, the floating villages were founded in the early 19th century in response to rising sea levels; an issue that now jeopardises their future.

With no land and few material possessions, such water-dwellers traditionally sustained themselves through a combination of fishing and aquaculture. Living hand to mouth, children as young as five are well-versed in casting fishing nets. However, today the villagers also depend on tourism. Each household lives on a separate houseboat or raft, which serves as not just their home, but their means of transport and work too.



Ha Long Bay's many cave names originate in history and local mythology

The bay features numerous hidden areas to explore in smaller boats or kayaks

the same spa treatments and massages as their more expensive counterparts, this is hardly the place for eyes-closed pampering.

For a quirkier, shorter experience, Vietnamese expeditions set off from Tuan Chau Pier, 13 kilometres (eight miles) southwest of Ha Long City. These tours, spread over four to six hours, visit Dau Go and Thien Cung caves. While the 25-metre-high (82-foot-high) former is renowned for its magical formations, the latter is known for its shapes resembling mythical beasts and four pillars of heaven; earning it the moniker 'Heaven Cave'. It was also allegedly where the Dragon Prince held his seven-night wedding bonanza.

Such local tours are not only cheaper, but decidedly Vietnamese – with busier boats rocking out to local karaoke hits. However, they can range from charmingly genuine to distractingly claustrophobic.

With mutiny out of the question, the ideal way to explore the quieter La Han Bay is with a private tour; courtesy of smaller operators, such as Eco Friendly Vietnam and Cat Ba Ventures. These personalised trips facilitate peaceful kayaking expeditions through seemingly uncharted caves and coves – slowly enough to keep an eye out for the region's 1,000 species of fish, types of coral and even seals and dolphins.

Cat Ba is the largest island in the region, with a population of 13,500. Nicknamed 'Jurassic Park Island', it is a treasure trove of natural delights; boasting luscious mangroves, sandy beaches, swamp forests, freshwater lakes, lagoons, coral reefs and more. As such, it makes for a stunning alternative to the standard cruise, with many choosing to stay here for multiple days instead.

Half of the island is a protected national park, home to more than 1,000 types of plant, 70 breeds of bird and 32 species of mammal; most notably the almost-extinct golden-headed langur, of which fewer than 70 exist. It makes for fertile hiking ground, with trails snaking 18 kilometres (11 miles) up the mountain – a summit from which the island stretches out like a green cloud of life. Elsewhere, unlike most caves on the luxury cruise route, Trung Trang requires an Indiana Jones approach; one of flashlights and caution. A ride back to town should be secured in advance, to avoid the middle-of-nowhere surge pricing.

A rather more outward-looking point, just a little outside Cat Ba town, is Cannon Fort – a viewing platform complete with Japanese-built tunnels and gun emplacements. Gazing at the serene Monkey Island, Ban Islet and the fishing boats and floating houses of Lan Ha Bay, it is hard to reconcile a country so peaceful with its troubled past. However, Hospital Cave provides a stern reminder in its 17-room, bomb-proof underground safe house and hospital built during the Vietnam War. Though utilitarian by design, the shelter even incorporated a large natural cavern, which doubled as a cinema.

With such abundant natural beauty, it is hard to say which isle is the jewel in Ha Long Bay's crown. It is a region so stunning, it takes days to process what you've seen. As the boat whispers back towards the port, back to reality, in the end the simplest explanation is sometimes the most fitting – emeralds, dragons and all.

Traditional junks are a favourite way to soak in the ethereal atmosphere

54 THE FORBIDDEN CITY

Jump into the heart of China's imperial past in a truly unique palace complex

If you want to explore China's vibrant history, the Forbidden City is the place to start. While the emperors were ruling, you wouldn't have dared step inside – you probably couldn't have even tried with its 54-metre-wide (177-foot-wide) moat and ten-metre-high (33-foot-high) walls – but now the doors have been flung open and everyone can uncover imperial China in all of its red and gold glory.

Nestled in the heart of the bustling capital of Beijing, on the north side of the famous Tiananmen Square, this sprawling palatial complex that covers 720,000 square metres was home to 24 Chinese emperors from 1368 to 1911. Opulently decorated, there are more than 90 courtyards, 980 buildings and more than 8,728 rooms in total, so as you can imagine, there's rather a lot to see!

Attracting 14 million visitors a year, there are bound to be a lot of people at the Forbidden City when you visit, but don't let that put you off. The architecture alone is stunning, with the entire complex built to adhere to the Chinese practice of feng shui. The walls are painted a vibrant red – China's lucky colour – and the roofs are just one way you can tell the importance of each individual building.

The city itself can be split into three sections: the defences, the outer court and the inner court. As previously mentioned, an extremely wide moat runs around the entire complex, which was important in protecting against rebels and raiders. There are only four gates to enter, and the one that is most used by visitors is the Meridian Gate, which can be accessed through the Gate of Heavenly Peace on Tiananmen Square.

You'll then find yourself in the outer court, where grand ceremonies and state affairs were conducted. It's here that you'll locate the most important building in the whole complex: the Hall of Supreme Harmony, home to the magnificent Dragon Throne of the emperors. The other two buildings you'll find here are the Hall of Central Harmony, where the emperor rested before grand events, and the Hall of Preserving Harmony, which was used for hosting lavish banquets.

When you continue on, you'll end up at a huge block of marble with cloud and dragon designs. You could stand here for hours admiring the artwork, but keep going straight and you'll find yourself walking through the Gate of Heavenly Purity and into the inner court, which was the main living area of China's famed emperors. Here you'll discover the Palace of Heavenly Purity, the leaders' sleeping quarters; the Palace of Union and Peace, where the emperors' seals were stored; and the Hall of Terrestrial Tranquility, the emperors' wedding venue.

Steeped in history and beautifully decorated, the Forbidden City really can't be missed on any trip to China or the Far East. With so much to explore, including a museum with many featured exhibitions, it should rocket to the top of everyone's list of places to see.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

It might take longer than you think to see everything, so make sure you give yourself plenty of time!

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to March
(it's less busy)

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

CURRENCY
CN¥
CHINESE YUAN

USEFUL SITES

en.dpm.org.cn
chinahighlights.com/beijing/forbidden-city/
travelchinaguide.com/cityguides/beijing/forbidden.htm

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Beijing's royal palace complex has a wheelchair-friendly route. GPS audio guides play automatically based on your location – a useful feature for the visually impaired.

Public transport - The main entrance via Tiananmen Square can be reached from the Tiananmen West subway station – just a 5-minute walk away. A stairlift from metro to street level is provided for wheelchair users.

FIND OUT MORE

wheelchairtravel.org/exploring-beijings-forbidden-city-in-a-wheelchair/

Only 40 per cent of the Forbidden City is open to the public, but that's more than enough to keep you busy!

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Maintain safe distances from wildlife, and refrain from touching plants, as many are protected by law.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to October

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

CURRENCY
RM
MALAYSIAN RINGGIT

USEFUL SITES

borneoadventure.com
mulupark.com
sarawaktourism.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Walking through the cities, such as the capital, Kuching, will be much easier than traversing the rainforest or cave systems at Gunung Mulu National Park.

Public transport - There is a public bus service, but as most civilisations were built by rivers, it might be easier to get around using the ferry services.

FIND OUT MORE

businesseventssarawak.com/sarawak-destination/getting-around/

55 SARAWAK

On the Malaysian part of Borneo, Sarawak is a showcase of natural beauty

Perhaps nowhere else on Earth is the fragile and delicate balance between humanity and nature more evident than in the Malaysian state of Sarawak on the island of Borneo. Verdant jungles abound and roaring rivers weave a tapestry of unspoiled nature throughout the countryside, and while commerce and industry have gained ground, the movement for preservation is working in tandem to protect Borneo's fragile ecosystems, while maintaining the prospect of future economic growth.

The largest of the Malaysian states, Sarawak, is the home of such diversity in flora and fauna that their threatened existence has resulted in the establishment of at least ten national parks. Here, rare species of animals and plants are sheltered in sanctuary and visitors have the opportunity to observe – but not disturb – these wonders. Gunung Mulu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the best-known of these parks. Attracting more than 120,000 visitors annually, the park is home to over 3,500 species of vascular plants along with 270 species of birds and 81 mammal species. The towering peak of Gunung Mulu, soaring approximately 2,377 metres (7,799 feet) above sea level, dominates the lush landscape, while caves, waterfalls and stunning vegetation are visible at every turn. The easiest way to reach Gunung Mulu is by flying into a regional airport in the northeast or taking a quick trip from the coastal town of Miri. There are several other national parks worthy of exploration scattered across the emerald isle of Sarawak, including Loagan Bunut, Kubah, Bako, Niah and Tanjun Datu.

Many visitors are lured to Sarawak each year to catch a glimpse of wildlife that may be seen in their natural habitat nowhere else on Earth, including the orangutan and Borneo pygmy elephant. Bako is the oldest national park on Sarawak and is widely renowned for its population of proboscis monkeys.

Most visitors begin their exploration of Sarawak in the capital city of Kuching, the centre of local commerce and a focal point of the ethnic diversity that is readily apparent in the region, including indigenous native peoples and others of Chinese, Malay and varied origins. The city is served by numerous airlines flying from major cities across Southeast Asia; moderately priced and upscale hotel accommodations are readily available; and short, regional flights to more remote destinations are easily obtained. Kuching is nestled along the banks of the Sarawak River. Its name translates to English as 'cat', so varied locales within the city pay homage to the feline, including several museums. Transportation is always nearby, with taxis and cars for hire. Visitors may stroll the streets and experience the local sights and sounds, while examining crafts and wares from vendors and storefronts.

Adventurous visitors may choose to take a short air or river excursion to the interior of Sarawak, experiencing native villages whose inhabitants still pursue the ancient ways of living, hunting and gathering for sustenance and residing in native longhouses. Book these excursions early and be prepared to negotiate challenging conditions, including hikes and crossings of uneven terrain.

The Gawai Dayak festival occurs each June, and is a popular event for visitors to revel in. Celebrating the harvest and the beginning of another prosperous year, the festival includes costumed dancers, exotic cuisine and a whole month of celebration.

56 TOKYO

Beneath the bright lights, Japan's capital is a trove of cultural treasures

Tokyo is a city of impossible contrasts. An endless labyrinth of skyscrapers, bordered by mountain and sea; a neon, retrofuturist dream throttling past pockets of serenity – scattered with historic castles, temples and parks. One of the world's most populous cities, it is understandably among the hardest to truly penetrate. It is Japan at its least nuanced, a window dressing of stereotype, cloaked precariously over an incredibly rich culture, largely unknown to those beyond its bounds.

Among the city's best-known wards is Shinjuku; a microcosm of the city itself, home to its largest railway station, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building. Nestled within its claustrophobic streets is Kabukicho, Japan's grittiest and seediest neighbourhoods – though, tellingly, oft-called one of Asia's 'safest red-light districts'.

Marked by large, red gates, it is a surreal cluster of bars, eateries and restaurants, drenched in artificial light – most notably the Robot Restaurant, where food takes a back seat to spectacle. One of the world's most unmissable shows, Robot Restaurant is a celebration of Japanese stereotype turned up all the way to 11. A feast for the senses does not even begin to explain this bizarre, explosive battle between robot and dancer.

The adjacent area of Golden Gai presents a rare example of older Tokyo architecture, surviving both natural disasters and war. Engulfed on all sides by looming skyscrapers, it is a time capsule, filled with numerous tiny bars, frequented by the city's actors, artists and musicians looking for a peaceful escape from the metropolis beyond.

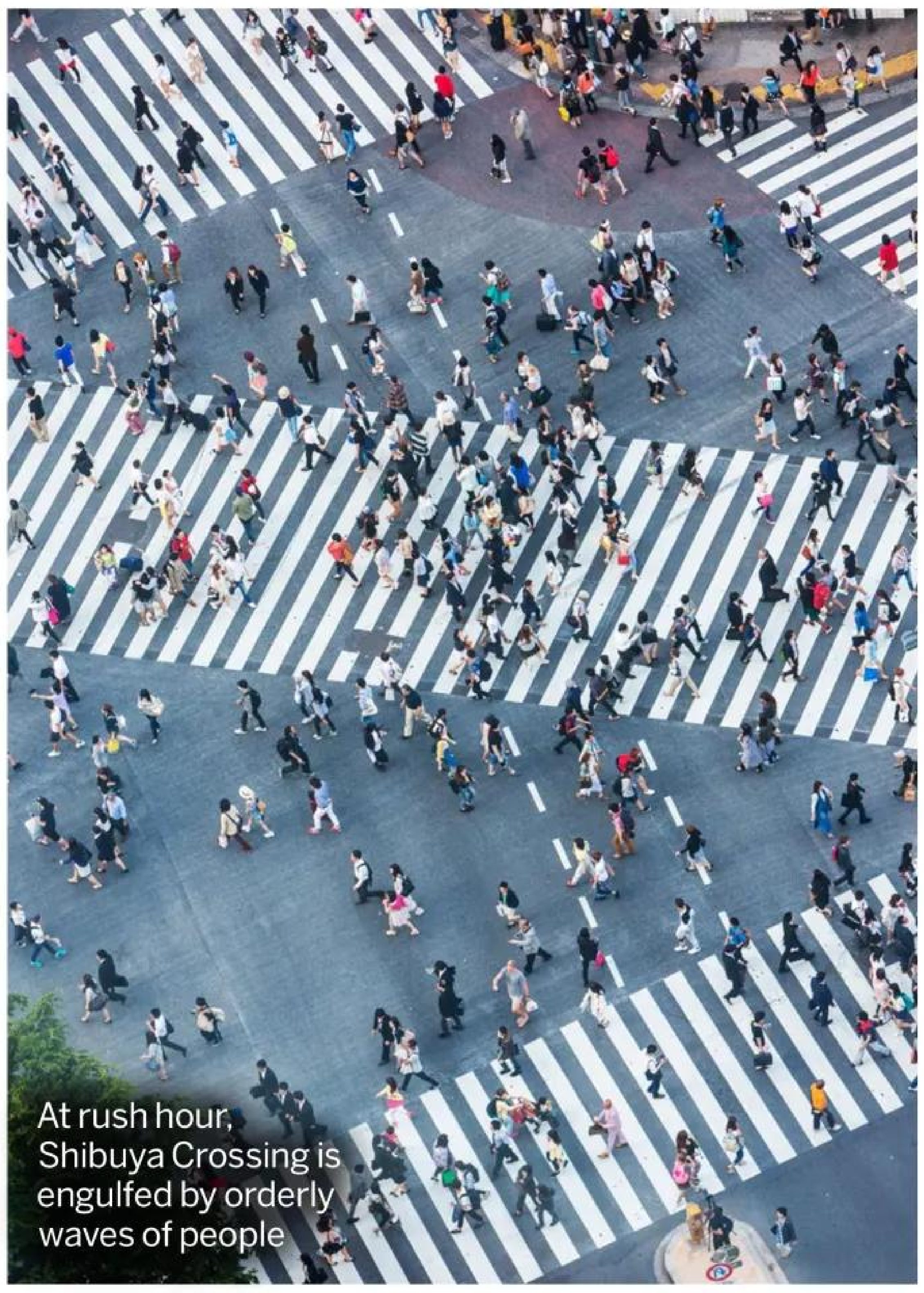
Offering an even quieter break is Shinjuku Gyoen, a stunning park with three main gardens. The first, in traditional Japanese style, features 1,500 cherry trees, two ponds joined by a small river, and a pavilion built to commemorate the royal wedding of Emperor Hirohito. Elsewhere, a French garden mimics the splendour of Versailles with roses aplenty, while an English garden brings a touch of natural British charm to the Japanese archipelago. A curious greenhouse also boasts a tropical cocktail of flowers and plants.

The adjacent ward of Shibuya is home to the infamous Shibuya Crossing, an intersection outside the station where, at the turn of a light, seas of people flood across the road, heading towards homes, offices and shops. The area hosts an array of department stores, housed in skyscrapers with floors of restaurants. Shibuya is also considered to be a major driving force behind the country's fashion industry, with many new trends starting here.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Harajuku, an area made famous for its namesake 'Harajuku style' – a wacky hotchpotch of punk, cosplay, kawaii cute, bold colour and all things over-the-top. Beyond a thicket of trees, the spectacular Shinto shrine of Meiji-Jingu is dedicated to Emperor Meiji, whose ascendance stripped power away from the samurai class and thrust Japan into an era of modernisation.

One of Shibuya's more curious landmarks is Love Hotel Hill, where you'll find the capital's highest concentration of love hotels – frequented by couples who don't have anywhere else to spend time alone.

To the east is Tokyo's centre of ultraluxe chic, Ginza. Formerly a silver coin mint, the area was rebuilt after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. Today it houses some of the city's most prestigious brands and malls. Topped by an iconic clock tower, Seiko's Wako building survived the intense firebombing of World War II, an architectural legacy that is today full of designer brands, a delectable tea salon


At rush hour, Shibuya Crossing is engulfed by orderly waves of people

HARAJUKU IS A WACKY HOTCHPOTCH OF ALL THINGS OVER-THE-TOP

Japan's national sport of sumo wrestling is a true spectacle, as two burly men attempt to out-muscle one another

© John Paul Antes

Tokyo Skytree offers panoramic views of the city that never ends

At night, Kabukicho comes alive, as a sea of neon lights (advertising all manner of businesses) battle for attention

and an art gallery. The ultramodern Tokyu Plaza, meanwhile, offers a bold contrast, with a kaleidoscopic entranceway – symbolising the country's world-class contemporary design.

A very different shopping experience can be had in Akihabara, a nexus of all things anime. Manga cafes sit alongside shops, overflowing with anime and video-game figurines, alongside electronic shops hawking retro Famicoms and assorted gadgets. Akihabara's 1,300-year-old Kanda-jinja Shinto shrine was famously where the notable rebel Taira no Masakado was enshrined in 940 and deified. Today, it is also represented by the mascot Nozomi Tojo, a shrine maiden from the anime Love Live!.

The nearby Ueno Park, originally part of the powerful Kaneiji Temple and one of Japan's earliest Western-style parks, features a long corridor of 1,000 cherry trees – prime hanami, or 'cherry blossom viewing', territory. The park's lotus-covered Shinobazu Pond, boasting an octagonal temple hall, is inspired by Lake Biwa – beneath the Kyoto temple that Kaneiji modelled itself after. Ueno also hosts an array of museums, including Tokyo National Museum and Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, as well as Ueno Zoo – the country's first.

In Sumida to the east, a bizarre, huge building rises as if on stilts. This modern behemoth, fashioned after a traditional storehouse, is home to the Edo-Tokyo Museum, a fascinating journey through the 400-year history of Japan's capital. The atmospheric museum offers insight into the development of the city, formerly known as Edo, and the lives of those who inhabited it – examining Japanese architecture and the nation's cultural heritage.

The nearby (ironically small) Sumo Museum makes for a smooth introduction to the larger-than-life sport, which can be enjoyed at the Ryogoku sumo stadium, with a hearty helping of katsu curry and rice and a dizzying drink of Chuhai. Tournaments are held during certain points of the year, and each day wrestlers do their best to throw their opponents to the ground, or push them out of the ring. By the end of the day, the atmosphere is electric, as pairs of Yokozuna duel to a cacophony of shrieking fans and camera flashes.

In the 17th century, sumo tournaments were held in the district of Asakusa, just to the north – then, the centre of entertainment and kabuki. Sensoji Temple is among the city's oldest and most magnificent Buddhist temples. It is preceded by the 200-metre (656-foot) shopping street, Nakamise, where vendors sell souvenirs and distinctive treats, such as amezaiku – elaborate, hand-crafted lollipops.

Just across the Sumida River is Tokyo Skytree, the world's second-tallest structure at 634 metres (2,080 feet). With two observation decks at 350 metres (1,148 feet) and 450 metres (1,476 feet), it makes for a stunning place to take in the city from up high. From here, Tokyo stretches out towards the horizon, a never-ending expanse of light and life.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Buy a Japan Rail Pass before visiting to save money on travel.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May (for cherry blossoms) or September to November (to avoid crowds)

TIME ZONE

UTC+9

USEFUL SITES

www.japan.travel
sumo.or.jp/en
japan-guide.com

CURRENCY
¥
JAPANESE YEN

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Despite Japan being mountainous, Tokyo is quite a flat city, with well-maintained streets and roads which make walking around easier.

Public transport - There is an efficient network of trains, buses and subway lines. The JR Yamanote Line is a loop line which connects Tokyo's multiple city centres.

FIND OUT MORE

gotokyo.org/en/plan/accessibility/index.html

Japan's Noh theatre is among the oldest extant theatrical forms

THEATRE

Japanese culture varies greatly from region to region, but the capital of Tokyo is a brilliant gateway to some of the country's most beloved artistic heritage.

Among Japan's most recognisable forms of theatre is Kabuki, which originated during the Edo period, beginning in 1603. Performers don elaborate costumes and makeup, acting out historical dramas on intricate stages, with trapdoors and revolving platforms.

Bunraku theatre, meanwhile, sees a narrator tell a story, accompanied by a shamisen, acted out by puppets. The puppeteers, dressed all in black, animate not just the puppets' limbs, but facial expressions too – requiring a great deal of training and expertise.

Music is also central to Noh theatre, which was developed by 14th-century actor Kan'ami Kiyotsugu and his son Zeami. It is a minimalist, slow and ponderous reflection of themes, narrated by masked performers, often representing supernatural beings.

Kerala's network of rivers, canals and backwaters is home to a vast array of wildlife

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Those hoping to visit Kerala's wildlife sanctuaries should book in advance with the Kerala Forest Department.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to February (for cool, dry weather) or June to August (for monsoon Ayurveda treatment programmes)

TIME ZONE

UTC+5:30

CURRENCY
₹
INDIAN RUPEE

USEFUL SITES

forest.kerala.gov.in
keralatourism.org/ayurveda-centres
highrangespicegardenhomestay.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Alleppey is said to be southern India's first fully accessible beach. One-level houseboats on the Backwaters are available, so enquire before you go.

Public transport - Low-floor buses serve urban areas. The train station in Thiruvananthapuram offers wheelchairs and a boarding ramp.

FIND OUT MORE

fitfortravel.nhs.uk/destinations/caribbean/cuba

57 KERALA

India's water-drenched state of Kerala is a feast of natural beauty and culture

Fog and clouds intersperse with jungle, the sun melting over the distant horizon, to a melodic tune of insects and swishing water. When speaking of their home state, Keralans' eyes often light up with pride and one word springs to mind: beautiful. Stretching 580 kilometres (360 miles) along India's southwestern coast towards the Arabian Sea, its highlands slope down from the Western Ghats into the valleys and hills of the midlands – all connected by a network of 44 rivers and their offshoot canals and backwaters.

Kerala's demographic diversity is on full show at Kochi, a historic trading port, welcoming Arab and Chinese merchant alike – later joined by the British, Dutch and Portuguese. Modern Kochi is a fascinating mishmash of colonial churches, synagogues and mosques, the oldest European fort in India, Chinese fishing nets drooping over the coast, and palaces showcasing Indian prestige and wealth.

Further south, the coastal hamlet of Varkala prides itself on its beach – where a natural spring, (believed to have healing qualities) offers relief to weary wanderers. The area is a hub of traditional Ayurvedic medicine, with retreats and resorts offering the uninitiated holistic physical, mental and spiritual relief. Sat atop the cliffs is the 13th-century Janardana Swamy Temple, joined by the nearby Sivagiri Mutt – an annual pilgrimage site for followers of the social and religious reformer Sree Narayana Guru.

The Keralan backwaters run parallel to the coastline, bleeding a laid-back lifeline into the state. One renowned beneficiary, Alappuzha, is often called the 'Venice of the East' and serves as a port for backwater adventures, boat races and local maritime and coconut industries. While the city centre is hectic, its outlying waters offer a serene meditation on the state's natural splendour. Here, visitors embark on cruises, aboard modernised kettuvallam houseboats, with thatched roofs and wooden hulls – which were traditionally used to carry rice and spices.

Just down the backwater is Kumarakom, a village spread over numerous small islands within Vembanad Lake's mangroves and paddy fields, watched over by tall coconut trees. Home to a 5.7-hectare (14-acre) bird sanctuary, from Siberian storks to herons and cuckoos to waterfowls, its colourful array of avian ambassadors have birdwatchers clutching at their binoculars.

Deep in the state's wild forests, the animal kingdom is the main attraction. Thekkady's Periyar Tiger Reserve covers 777 square kilometres (300 square miles), and is a tribute to nature at its wildest, with rich forests boasting almost 2,000 flowering plants. Though famous for its tiger population, the park is also home to more than 60 species of mammal, 265 types of bird and numerous reptiles and fish. Rivers and streams weave throughout, feeding its man-made lake. Boat trips take you amidst the overgrowth, past elephants, bison, leopards, snakes and frogs.

The area also hosts a variety of cardamom, pepper and coffee plantations. At Connemara Tea Factory, visitors can learn more about tea production and taste some of the region's finest brews. Meanwhile, the organic Highrange Spice Garden also doubles as a quaint homestay, tucked amidst the verdant magnificence of south India's favourite national park.

58 KATHMANDU

Be absorbed by Himalayan culture with a trip to Nepal's exciting capital

Kathmandu is awash with smells, sights and sounds that will keep your excitement levels at a maximum. Narrow, intertwining streets make way for streams of loud, pushy traffic. Dusty dirt tracks, pot-holed pavements and the scent of fragrant spices will hit you as you ride down the busy corridors of Nepal's fervent capital.

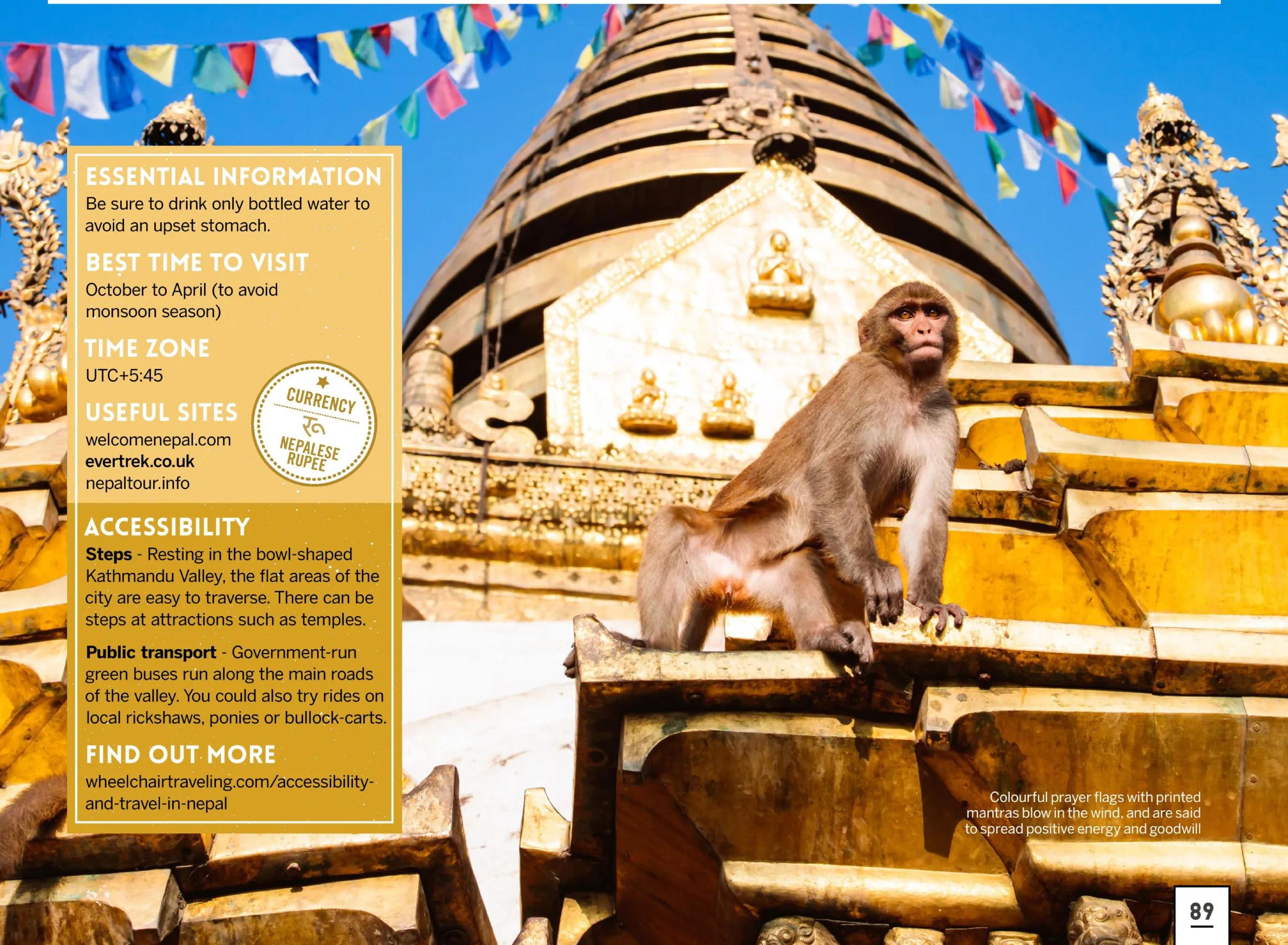
Anyone who has experienced Kathmandu first hand will happily regale you with stories of how welcoming and friendly Nepalese people are, and how special this capital city is.

From the main airport, jump into a taxi and head straight for the bustling district of Thamel; the commercial heart of the city. This vibrant, noisy district is filled with motorcyclists and cars striving to get ahead of each other, and they are not shy to use their horns. Getting around Kathmandu is best done by foot. You can browse as you pass by numerous shops selling trekking gear, warm clothing and camping goods. For a more laid-back journey, however, you could step aboard a rickshaw peddled by a local tradesman who'll wind you through the streets towards your next destination.

If all this gets too much, take a stroll into the neo-classical historical Garden of Dreams, situated on the outskirts of Thamel. This is where you can make an escape from the noise and commotion of the centre in a relaxing outdoor setting.

When you're not planning for the next big adventure into the mountains, explore the plethora of stupas, monasteries and religious temples adorning Kathmandu's streets. Gain a stronger insight into how numerous religions (predominantly Buddhism and Hinduism) live in harmony and run deep through the veins of the people and their city. Head out on a tour around the ancient royal complex of Durbar Square to witness grand palaces and their courtyards; or walk the many steps to Swayambhunath temple, also known as the 'monkey temple', for spectacular views over the city's rooftops. Take a trip up to the impressive World Heritage Site of Boudhanath stupa and spin prayer wheels as you pass on by. Enjoy hole-in-the-wall restaurants serving up local dishes such as dal bhat, a lentil-based rice meal, as well as spectacularly spiced curries cooked in plain sight in open ovens.

For those looking to explore further afield, Kathmandu makes for a great starting base. Treat your city break as a stepping stone into the Himalayan mountain range. You could end up exploring routes up to Everest Base Camp, or deeper into the Annapurna mountain range for a longer excursion into the snowy wilderness. Tours take off from Tribhuvan International Airport, flying via Lukla to Base Camp, and can last up to two weeks. Planning well ahead of time is essential so as not to lose your spot. Coaches operate from Kathmandu to Pokhara for excursions into the Annapurna Circuit. Alternatively, book a tour down to Chitwan National Park to enjoy a range of activities such as canoeing, rhino and tiger spotting, as well as elephant riding before heading back to the busy streets of Kathmandu.



Colourful prayer flags with printed mantras blow in the wind, and are said to spread positive energy and goodwill

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Be sure to drink only bottled water to avoid an upset stomach.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to April (to avoid monsoon season)

TIME ZONE

UTC+5:45

USEFUL SITES

welcomenepal.com
evertrek.co.uk
nepaltour.info

CURRENCY
रु
NEPALESE RUPEE

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Resting in the bowl-shaped Kathmandu Valley, the flat areas of the city are easy to traverse. There can be steps at attractions such as temples.

Public transport - Government-run green buses run along the main roads of the valley. You could also try rides on local rickshaws, ponies or bullock-carts.

FIND OUT MORE

wheelchairtraveling.com/accessibility-and-travel-in-nepal

The Registan – meaning 'sandy place' – is the centre of Samarkand's historic district

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Be sure to research the Uzbek visa process – it can be complicated.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Spring or autumn, to avoid the heat

TIME ZONE

UTC+5

CURRENCY
ЛВ
UZBEKISTAN SOM

USEFUL SITES

visituzbekistan.travel/sightseeing/samarkand/
lonelyplanet.com/uzbekistan/central-uzbekistan/samarkand

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Samarkand's attractions are spread across the city, but you can plan to explore different parts each day to see as much as possible.

Public transport - Minibuses run until the late evening. An electric cart shuttles up and down pedestrian Toshkent street to the Siyob Bazaar.

FIND OUT MORE

odysseytraveller.com/articles/travelling-uzbekistan/

59 SAMARKAND

Timur's regal city is a turquoise gem, deep in the deserts of Uzbekistan

Samarkand's historic buildings are as beautiful as the Indian fabrics and Chinese silks that once flurried through the regal city, on their long journey across the Silk Road. This city in Uzbekistan, in the middle of the barren steppes and deserts of Central Asia, was built on the back of Silk Road trading wealth – but it took the vision of one terrible emperor to turn it into the cultural jewel it is today.

Timur (the real-life inspiration for Christopher Marlowe's play, Tamburlaine the Great) was a ruthless warlord from the Middle Ages, who had absolutely no problem slaughtering anyone unlucky enough to be in his way. But he was also a man with lofty aspirations, and dreamed of turning the city of Samarkand into a new centre for Islamic learning and culture. By forcing great intellectuals and craftspeople from all over the Muslim world to live in the city, he succeeded – travellers who came to Timur's Samarkand marvelled at how it vastly exceeded anything they had ever seen before.

Now you can, too. Uzbekistan was once a place shrouded in mystery, so far behind the Iron Curtain that it was almost impenetrable. But since the dissolution of the USSR and the death of its harsh former president, Islam Karimov, the country is now able to slowly reveal its treasures to the world.

And what treasures they are. The centrepiece of Samarkand is the almighty Registan – meaning 'Sandy Place' – a public square surrounded by three stunning madrassas (Islamic schools/universities). Beneath the blue domes, golden ceilings and perfect patterned tiles, great men from all across the vast Timurid Empire came to study the Quran, as well as mathematics, literature, poetry and art. Explore them for yourself and come back when night falls, so you can see all their colours enhanced by an incredible light show.

But the terrifying Timur is never too far away. The Gur-e-Amir (Tomb of the King) is his final resting place, and it's said he placed a curse upon all those who dared to enter it. In the 1700s, a Persian warlord broke the slab of green jade that marked Timur's crypt when he tried to steal it. After that, he seemingly had an awful run of bad luck, with his son becoming gravely ill. The warlord returned the stone to Samarkand and apparently his son recovered. The stone still bears the cracks from this attempted robbery, but don't worry – you shouldn't be affected by the curse yourself, if you simply wish to stand in awe of this brutal emperor and his surprisingly beautiful tomb.

As well as the historic sights, any visitor to Samarkand should seek out an experience with Uzbekistan's unique culture. Look around a carpet factory and see highly skilled weaving women at work, creating magnificent items with just their hands. Or sample some local food in one of Samarkand's many traditional Uzbek restaurants – but be warned, it's not exactly suitable for vegetarians.

One of the best things about Samarkand right now is that it remains relatively undiscovered by tourists, but in order to marvel at this hidden gem all by yourself, you'll have to act quickly – a new high-speed rail network is making it much easier for foreign visitors to travel to it. So what are you waiting for?

Island-hopping tours, aboard wooden banca boats, take visitors to the outermost reaches of El Nido

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Groups of four or more should hire a private banca to chart their own route, free from the crowds.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to March (for best weather); March to May (for best diving)

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

CURRENCY
₱
PHILIPPINE PESO

USEFUL SITES

elnidoresorts.com
elnido-official.com
elnidoboutiqueandartcafe.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - There are several breathtaking hiking trails around El Nido, but these can be tricky to navigate.

Public transport - Van companies run regular shuttle trips to El Nido from Puerto Princesa, as well as an air-conditioned bus service. There are also several minivans available from Sabang.

FIND OUT MORE

daytripperpalawan.com/the-other-stuff/journal

60 EL NIDO

Secret beaches and a magic underwater world, El Nido is as idyllic as can be

Made up of 49 limestone isles, El Nido lies 238 kilometres (148 miles) north of Palawan's tropical capital. The gateway to the Bacuit Archipelago, one of Asia's most beloved natural treasures, El Nido's unspoilt beauty and rich biodiversity has been fiercely protected since 1991. Beyond the untouched beaches, prehistoric geologic formations give way to blue lagoons, and exotic marine life takes centre stage.

For sun worshippers, tropical paradise awaits on El Nido's many palm-fringed shores, where sea turtles nest on cotton-white sand, and butterflies fill the warm, salty air, resting on frangipani and bright bougainvillea. The only way to explore the archipelago's deepest nooks and crannies is to island-hop aboard traditional banca fishing boats.

North of the patchwork town of El Nido, Nacpan Beach stretches over three long, gorgeous kilometres (1.8 miles), embracing its twin, Calitang Beach, on the southwest tip. Watched over by a natural viewpoint, the turmeric-tinged sand is caressed by the warm ocean currents. Here, the only sounds are lapping waves and clicking geckos.

Another pristine patch – where the sand is icing-sugar soft, the ocean aquamarine, and eagles swoop overhead – Secret Beach is hugged by imposing limestone cliffs. Meanwhile, the laid-back Marimegmeg is best suited for colourful cocktails and tangy crab curry under the shade of coconut palms. As the wavering sun projects a rainbow, the beach transforms into an alfresco disco. Further north, curtained by verdant jungle, the remote Duli Beach offers up phenomenal surf breaks and deserted sands – the beating heart of El Nido's vibrant surfing community.

The adventure continues beneath the water's surface. Teeming with more than 100 species of coral and 800 tropical fish species, El Nido's biodiverse marine sanctuaries attract scuba divers in search of spectacular reefs and unusual underwater life. The shallow crystalline water of South Miniloc, El Nido's most famous dive site, is home to scorpion fish, seahorses and chevron barracuda. Another site, North Rock, boasts kaleidoscopic coral tables, passing blacktip reef sharks, sea cows and dolphins. Night-dive utopia Nat Nat crawls with critter-hunting hermit crabs and Spanish dancers.

For landlubbers keen to challenge their limits, El Nido's crisscrossed hiking trails follow a tapestry of karst formations, marble cliffs and waterfalls. Fortress-like, the limestone Taraw Peak, towering 230 metres (755 feet) heavenward, presents El Nido's toughest challenge. The near-vertical trail is not for the faint of heart, requiring some scrambling skills to negotiate the steep drop offs. Summiteers are rewarded with a bird's-eye view of the Bacuit Archipelago, its azure ocean dotted with anchored boats.

For inexperienced climbers, the canopy walk, El Nido Taraw Via Ferrata, offers a safer, more relaxed alternative. With stairs, scaffolding and suspension bridges, the trail makes scaling the geological monolith more a walk in the park than a dance with death.

Those in search of history trace the region's deep roots to Ille Cave. Believed to be over 14,000 years old, the chamber was used as a Stone Age burial site, and in 1998, 20,000 artefacts, such as stone tools and shell beads, were excavated from its limestone belly, as were tiger bones – the first evidence of these majestic creatures in the Philippines.

61 THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

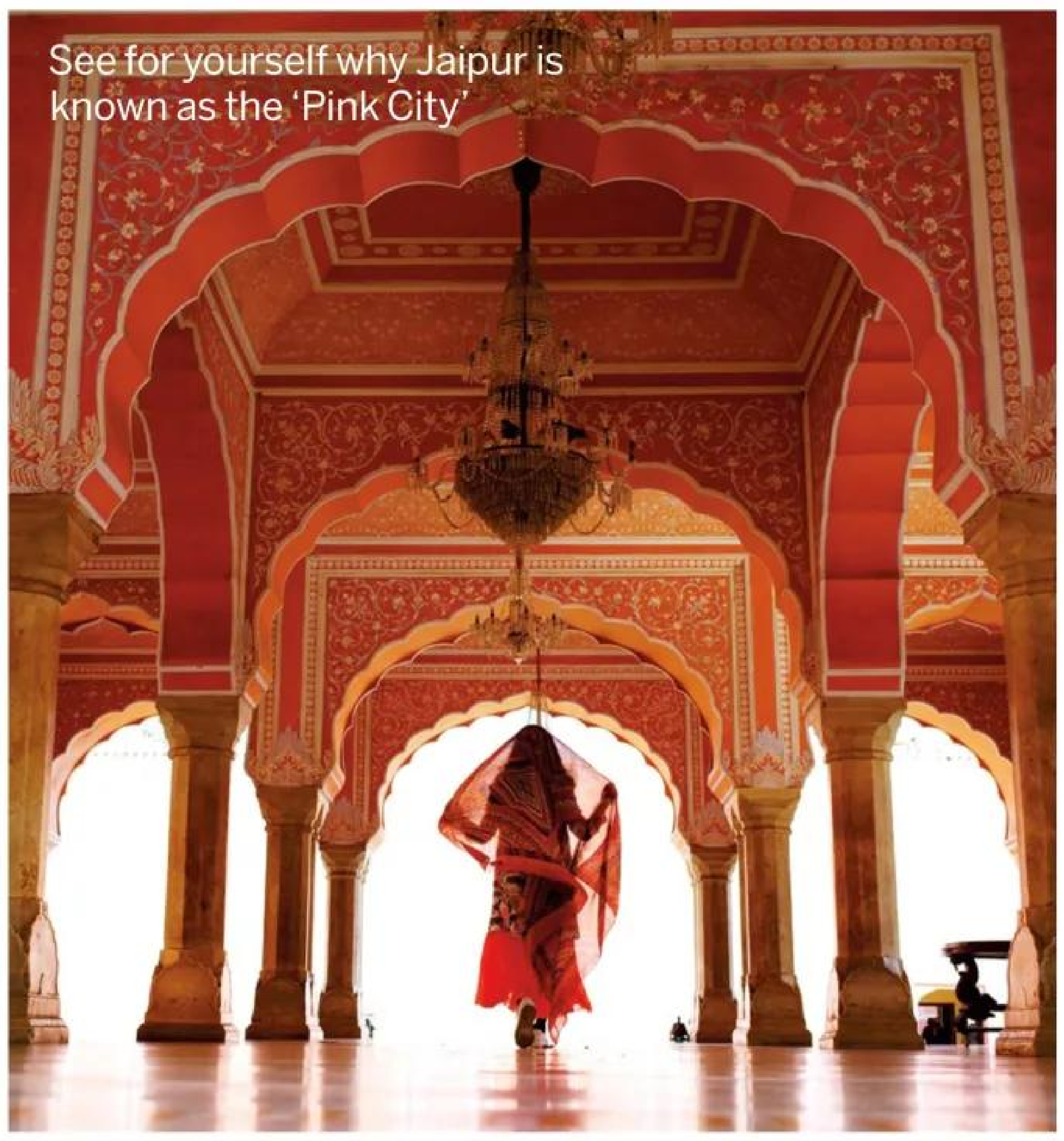
A tourist circuit connecting the Mughal cities of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur

With no less than eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites, there is no shortage of history or culture on this popular tour of northern India. The triangle links together the bustling capital of India, Delhi; the first capital of the Mughal Empire, Agra; and the opulent capital of Rajasthan, Jaipur.

Delhi is a sprawling metropolis of nearly 30 million people with three UNESCO sites – the Red Fort, Humayun's Tomb and Qutub Minar – as well as the famous Jama Masjid. You could spend any number of days walking through its markets, navigating a labyrinth of alleyways and observing the remnants of British colonialism.

Three-and-a-half hours later by coach, or just two hours by train, brings you to Agra, where the awe-inspiring white marble mausoleum that is the Taj Mahal continues to mesmerise audiences four centuries later. A mile away from the mighty monument lies the Agra Fort, Agra's second UNESCO site. Located just outside the city is Agra's final UNESCO site, the ghostly town of Fatehpur Sikri, the Mughal Empire's second capital city. Though now abandoned and with some sites lying in ruin, the city has not lost its enchanting charm, encompassing a blend of Persian and Indian architecture.

Your final stop, four hours' drive away, is the 'Pink City' of Jaipur – so-called because it was painted pink in 1867. Witness the architectural beauty of the Amber Fort and Jantar Mantar – both UNESCO sites – the Hawa Mahal, City Palace and the city's many bazaars. This trip covers approximately 466 miles, with much walking within the cities, but is an experience truly unlike any other.


See for yourself why Jaipur is known as the 'Pink City'

The Taj Mahal is a must-see on any India itinerary

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION
It's wise to book your transport far in advance. Seats on popular trains can sell out months beforehand.

BEST TIME TO VISIT
November and February to avoid the monsoon rains and summer heat.

TIME ZONE
UTC+5:30

CURRENCY
₹
INDIAN RUPEE

USEFUL SITES
indiatouristoffice.org/
incredibleindia.org/
indianvisit.com/

ACCESSIBILITY
Steps - There's a lot of walking on this trip, but many of the monuments are ramped to provide access. Taxis are aplenty.

Public transport - The most common way to travel between the cities is by train or coach, but they are not always very accessible. For peace of mind, book a private car instead.

FIND OUT MORE
disabilityhorizons.com/2013/06/accessible-india-part-1

62 BALI

Bali's natural beauty and sacred spiritualism are waiting to be discovered

Bali's rice paddies artfully stack atop one another

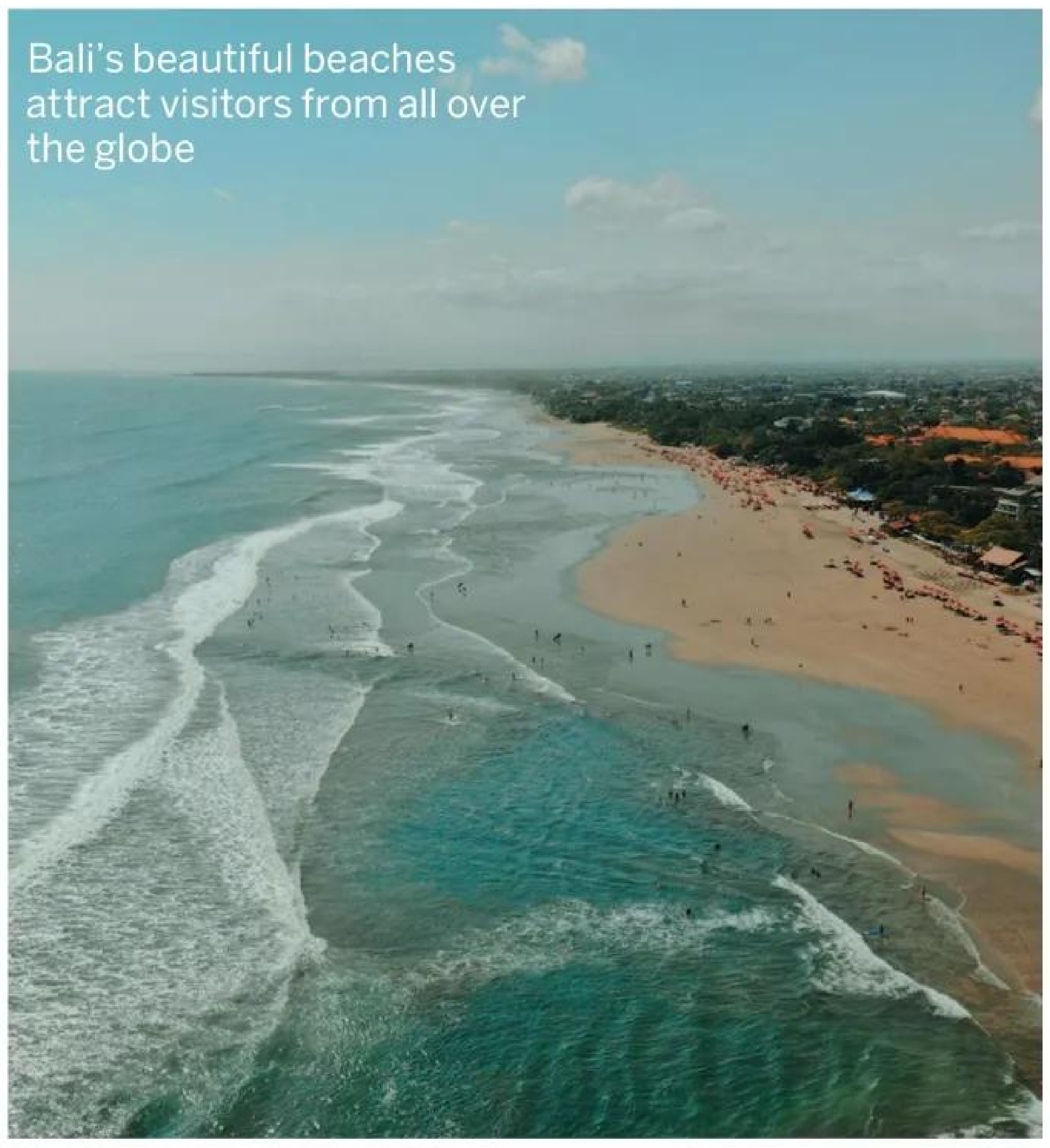
Known as the Island of the Gods, the mere mention of Bali conjures images of sweeping beaches, emerald green rice paddies and temple tangles. Spiritualism and tradition are threaded through everyday life, from otherworldly Balinese dances to colourful offerings adorning shrines and the hypnotic soundtrack of gamelan which is ever-present.

Embraced by terraced fields, Ubud is the island's cultural and spiritual heart. Galleries, museums, handicraft stalls and cafés fill its streets. And, while its densely packed centre is accessible on foot, Ubud's fringes reveal weathered monuments, traditional villages and luxurious resorts suspended high above the valley floor.

A 30-minute drive north, valleys unfold in a landscape of frangipani, banana trees and bamboo groves which echo with chants from nearby temples, like Tirta Empul. To the south, Seminyak offers a mature alternative to its party-hard neighbour, Kuta, complete with designer boutiques, chic hotels and beautiful powdery beaches.

Determined solitude seekers head for the black-coned volcanoes of the central mountains, or the jungle-drenched wild west – home to the long-forgotten sea temple, Rambut Siwi. Believed to protect the island from evil, the sprawling grounds are usually deserted, and easily viewed from the beach.

The mist-shrouded jungle of West Bali National Park offers up a slice of accessible wilderness. Teeming with ebony leaf monkeys, flying foxes, wild boar and giant monitor lizards, the once-endangered Bali starling soars overhead alongside bright-beaked hornbills and 160 other species of bird. Just off the coast, Menjangan Island offers the region's most spectacular underwater oasis, away from the east coast's over-crowded reefs, replete with turtles, manta rays, dolphins and even whale sharks.



Bali's beautiful beaches attract visitors from all over the globe

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

During religious holidays, such as Nyepi, prepare for delays and plan ahead, as much of the island shuts down. When visiting temples, always dress modestly.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to June, to avoid peak season.

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

CURRENCY

Rp

INDONESIAN RUPIAH

USEFUL SITES

indonesia.travel

balitourismboard.or.id

merahputihbali.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - While most temples feature stairs, Bali's beaches, shops and restaurants are usually walkable. Meanwhile, Sanur and Nusa Dua feature particularly accessible shorelines.

Public transport - While shuttle buses travel between the major cities, public transport is limited. Taxis, Uber or private drivers are affordable and comfortable alternatives.

FIND OUT MORE

accessibleindonesia.org

63 KYOTO

Kyoto is a treasure trove of sights and delights for travellers

For those who desire a location rich in history and tradition, yet with a touch of modernity, there's no better place than Kyoto. Plan on spending your time strolling through temple grounds – visit Tofuku-ji for its stunning gardens, or Shoren-in for a Zen experience. Alternatively, try relaxing in a hot spring. The water at Kurama Onsen is designed to soothe a variety of ailments. An experience you won't want to miss is wandering through Gion, Kyoto's geisha district, which you must visit in the early evening to catch a glimpse of a geisha on her way to a performance. Gion is also a great place to shop, or take part in a traditional tea ceremony.

Must-see sights include Kinkaku-ji, Japan's glorious 'Golden Pavilion', where you can stroll through the gardens that surround the gleaming pavilion and bask in the beauty of the decadent temple, set against Kyoto's ever-changing scenery. After you're done there, head on over to the permanently popular Fushimi Inari shrine, but make sure to avoid the crowds by opting for the 'hidden route' which allows you to amble through the forest, enjoying the peaceful shrine exactly as nature intended.

When it comes to authentic Japanese cuisine, the best restaurants are usually found off the well-trodden path. No matter how small and nondescript some restaurants may look, those with the longest lines and loudest laughter coming from within will offer up the best food, though a reservation or introduction from a Japanese speaker may be required.

For a general guide of where to start, head down to Ponto-cho by the Kamo River and follow your nose. Round off a hard day's exploring by sipping warm sake as you admire Kyoto's unique skyline from Kyoto Tower.

MUST-SEE SIGHTS INCLUDE KINKAKU-JI, JAPAN'S GLORIOUS 'GOLDEN PAVILION'

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Tipping culture does not exist in Japan, so make sure to show your appreciation for a delicious meal by leaving a clean plate.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to early April for the Sakura or cherry blossom season.

TIME ZONE

UTC+9

CURRENCY
¥
JAPANESE YEN

USEFUL SITES

kyotostation.com
crafttabby.com/alternative-fushimi-inari-walking-tour

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Visiting the temples in Kyoto will require a fair amount of walking, though many of the more popular sights are wheelchair accessible and have gentle slopes.

Public transport - Kyoto boasts an excellent public transport network with regular trains and buses available to take you to most destinations with ease.

FIND OUT MORE

japan-accessible.com/city/kyoto

Spend the day shopping, tasting traditional Japanese snacks, drinking tea and admiring the geisha as you wander through Kyoto's famous Gion district

The Gardens by the Bay feature these glorious illuminated tree sculptures

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

There are three main communities in Singapore: Malay, Chinese and Tamil.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

February and April (the dry season)

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

CURRENCY
S$
SINGAPORE DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

visitsingapore.com
acm.org.sg
wrs.com.sg/en/river-safari.html

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Singapore is very big, so although you can walk between some attractions, it's wise to make use of public transport.

Public transport - The subway system in Singapore is definitely the easiest and most comfortable way to get around, or find a trishaw rider outside the Raffles Hotel.

FIND OUT MORE

lta.gov.sg/content/ltaweb/en/public-transport.html

64

SINGAPORE

Sample the lives of the super-rich in Asia's most prosperous destination

When you visit Singapore, you'll be spoilt for choice in terms of things to do. Featuring leading museums, art galleries, a variety of cultures and natural wonders, it's no wonder this small island attracts so many visitors. Singapore is clean and very safe, and over-50s have the benefit of being highly respected in many of the local cultures.

One thing that older travellers should consider before going is the heat – Singapore sits just above the equator, so it gets a humid tropical climate all year round. Thankfully, much of Singapore is equipped with state of the art air-con. Just remember to pack plenty of breathable clothing, a sun hat and plenty of sun cream.

You can take frequent breaks from the heat with visits to the many museums and attractions around the city. The Asian Civilisations Museum is located close to Raffles Place, and it focuses on Singapore's ancestral culture as well as the rich artistic heritage of Asia. End your afternoon with a stop in the historic Raffles Hotel, just a 12-minute walk away, and enjoy a Singapore Sling cocktail in the bar where the iconic drink was first invented. And why not visit the National Museum of Singapore, which is also nearby? It's the oldest museum in the city, and gives visitors a multimedia experience of the country's history and archaeological heritage.

Despite the skyscrapers, Singapore is known for its beautiful natural surroundings, including nature reserves, parks and beaches. The Botanical Gardens are one of the oldest in the world, known for their pretty orchids, peaceful walks, and pleasant water features. Alternatively, pay a visit to Singapore Zoo, where you can go on the Night Safari that gives visitors a unique night-time look at more than 1,000 nocturnal animals from around the world. After a day of shopping in Singapore's designer malls, take in the beautiful Gardens by the Bay, which offer visitors vibrant lush greenery and spectacular floral displays – they're designed to be accessible to all.

There's plenty of new experiences in Singapore

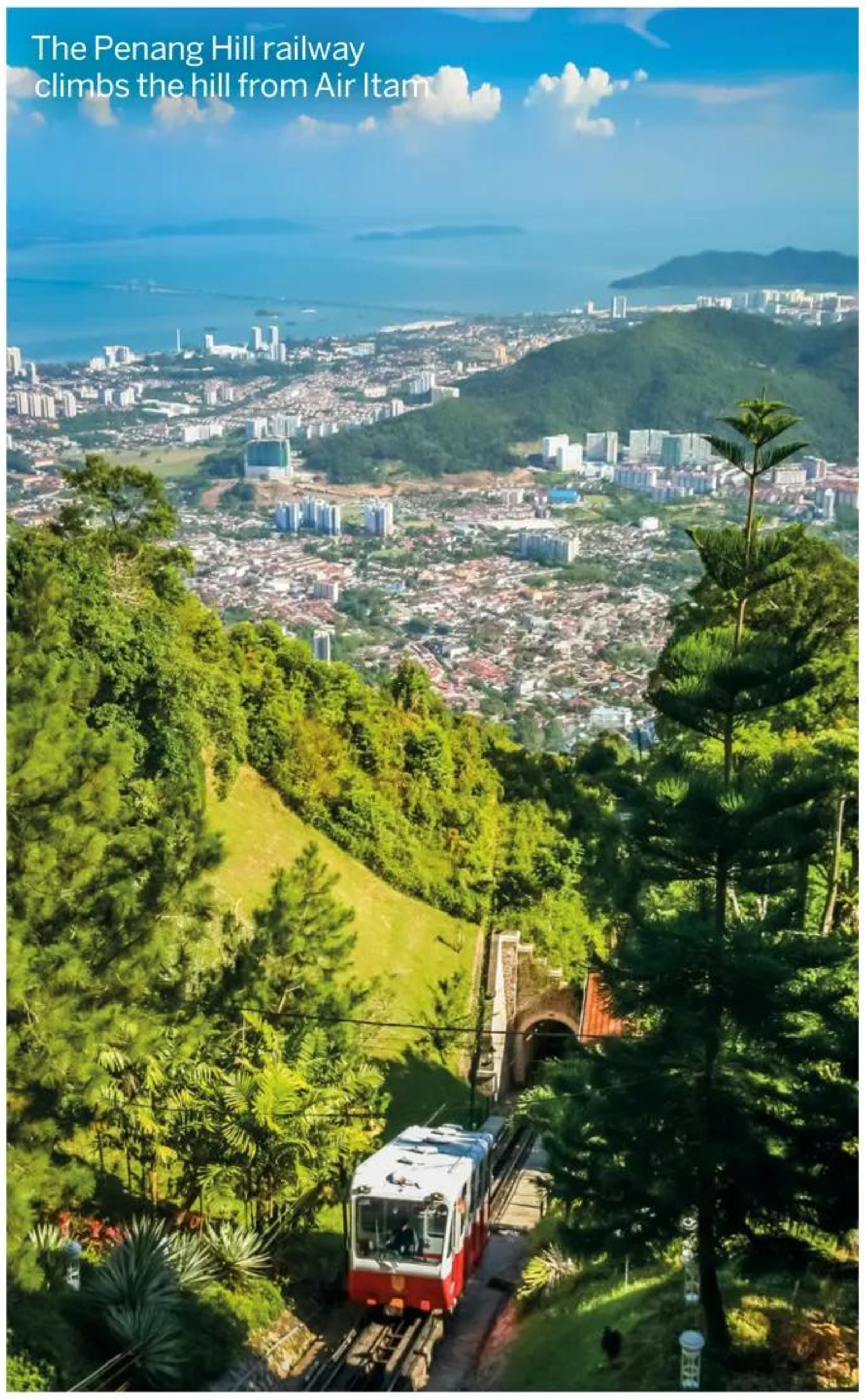
65 PENANG

The bustling, modern Asian metropolis with one foot in the past

Most visitors to the Malaysian state of Penang begin in the region's capital, George Town. Once the first British settlement in southeast Asia, it has evolved into a busy, cosmopolitan melting pot of Malay, British, Chinese and Indian cultures. Explore the past through the city's fine collection of historical buildings, lovingly preserved and looked after thanks to a World Heritage Site listing. Be sure to catch a glimpse of the stunning Blue Mansion, once home to a wealthy Chinese merchant. Returning to the modern day, check out the art installations at the former Hin Bus Depot and tread carefully across the glass walkway of the Rainbow Skywalk atop the KOMTAR Tower – though not one for those scared of heights.

It's also worth spending a day exploring the suburbs of Air Itam. Though largely a residential district, it is also home to the Kek Lok Si Temple, a religious complex that includes the striking Pagoda of Ten Thousand Buddhas. Around 20 minutes walk away is a funicular railway that rises from Air Itam to the top of Penang Hill, lifting weary tourists out of the heat and humidity to enjoy fabulous views across the city and, perhaps just as importantly, a cool, refreshing breeze.

If urban life gets too overwhelming, escape the busy streets of the capital. The north of Penang Island offers sandy beaches and luxury hotels, while the farming backcountry of the west is perfect for exploring the Pearl of the Orient's more sedate side.



The Penang Hill railway climbs the hill from Air Itam

Bright Buddha statues along the walls of Kek Lok Si Temple

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Penang can be visited by plane, ferry or over the bridges from the mainland.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to March, to avoid the wet season.

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

CURRENCY
RM
MALAYSIAN RINGGIT

USEFUL SITES

mypenang.gov.my
penang.ws
visit-malaysia.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Walking is one of the best ways to experience George Town and its pavements are in good condition, although traffic may be busy.

Public transport - There is a good bus service, particularly in and around George Town. Consider a city tour in a rickshaw, but negotiate the price first.

FIND OUT MORE

wapenang.blogspot.com

66 SEOUL

For those who prefer the hustle and bustle of a city constantly on the move

Cultural landmarks, historic markets, temples, museums, plus an endless sea of shops and an unrivalled street food scene. Seoul has it all.

For those interested in the more traditional side of Seoul, head down to Bukchon Hanok Village where you can marvel at traditional Korean homes dating back to the 1300s. A short walk away from the village, you'll find the Gyeongbokgung and Changdeokgung palaces – set aside an afternoon to explore their sprawling grounds. Following that, enjoy the sunset along the banks of either Seoul's infamous Han River, or the artistic Cheonggyecheon Stream.

If you prefer a little more liveliness, Myeongdong (Seoul's most notable shopping district filled with stores specialising in everything from cosmetics to luxury goods), Insadong (a neighbourhood brimming with antiques, artwork and traditional goods) or Gwangjang Market (Seoul's oldest traditional market) are all excellent stop-offs. While you're there, gorge yourself on South Korean street food. Highlights include tteokbokki (spicy rice cakes), croissant boong-uh-ppang (croissant pastry pressed into the shape of a goldfish), and grilled cheese lobster.

No matter what you end up doing, make sure to end your trip at a Korean sauna and spa known as a jjimjilbang. Do away with Western notions of modesty and spend an hour soaking nude in a public bath, then enjoy a full (and extremely rigorous) body scrub and massage that will have your skin feeling softer and fresher than ever before.

As one of the world's fastest-growing cities, Seoul will leave you contemplating relocating to South Korea permanently.

> **MAKE SURE YOU END YOUR TRIP AT A KOREAN SAUNA AND SPA**

Hyangwonjeong Pavilion is located in Gyeongbokgung palace grounds

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Many popular locations are closed on Mondays, so check opening hours before visiting to avoid disappointment.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September to mid November, when temperatures are mild.

TIME ZONE

UTC+9

CURRENCY
₩
SOUTH KOREAN WON

USEFUL SITES

theseoulguide.com

dragonhillspa.com/en

english.visitseoul.net

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Though Seoul does have excellent provisions for those with accessibility requirements, prepare for a lot of walking down extremely long and wide streets.

Public transport - If you'd rather not walk, take advantage of Seoul's unbelievably cheap public transport. Purchase a touch pass for use on buses, trains and taxis nationwide.

FIND OUT MORE

english.visitkorea.or.kr

67 SI PHAN DON

Discover 4,000 islands of the Mekong River in Laos, where time stands still

Drifting slowly down the muddy, brown Mekong River, it is easy to forget the world beyond. The 'rice bowl' of Asia, the Mekong breathes life into the otherwise landlocked nation of Laos. It brings with it not just fresh water, but an outstanding array of aquatic flora and fauna, with more than 1,100 species of fish – second only to the Amazon River. The Irrawaddy dolphin, Mekong giant catfish and giant freshwater stingray all call these waters home.

One side of the riverbank is lined with wooden huts, the other rich foliage. In the distance, a Laotian fisherman stands atop his boat, casting his net. He pulls it out and pauses; water bursts softly from the river, as freshwater dolphins surface for air. Such is the pace of life in Si Phan Don, Laos' '4,000 Islands' – a dense archipelago of islands, mostly tiny and inhospitable in Champasak Province.

At Nakasang village, small ferries line up, preparing to set off for Muang Khong, the eastern town on Si Phan Don's largest island, Don Khong. On the other side, the coast of Don Khong reveals cosy clusters of stilted houses above the waterline, looming banana trees, wayward cows and waving fishermen.

With bags thrown in one of the island's many guesthouses, the best way to explore is by foot, tuk tuk, bicycle or motorbike. The island, 18 kilometres (11 miles) long and eight kilometres (five miles) wide, hosts around 20 villages. Those who do not sustain themselves from the river live off the land, with farms producing palm sugar, palm-leaf hats and lao khao – fermented rice whisky. Twice a day, sugar farmers in Ban Hin Siew Tai, the heart of Laos' sugar industry, scale their trees and collect juice to boil into sugar. Their produce makes its way to the local market at Ban Kang Don, where the fishermen hawk their hauls.

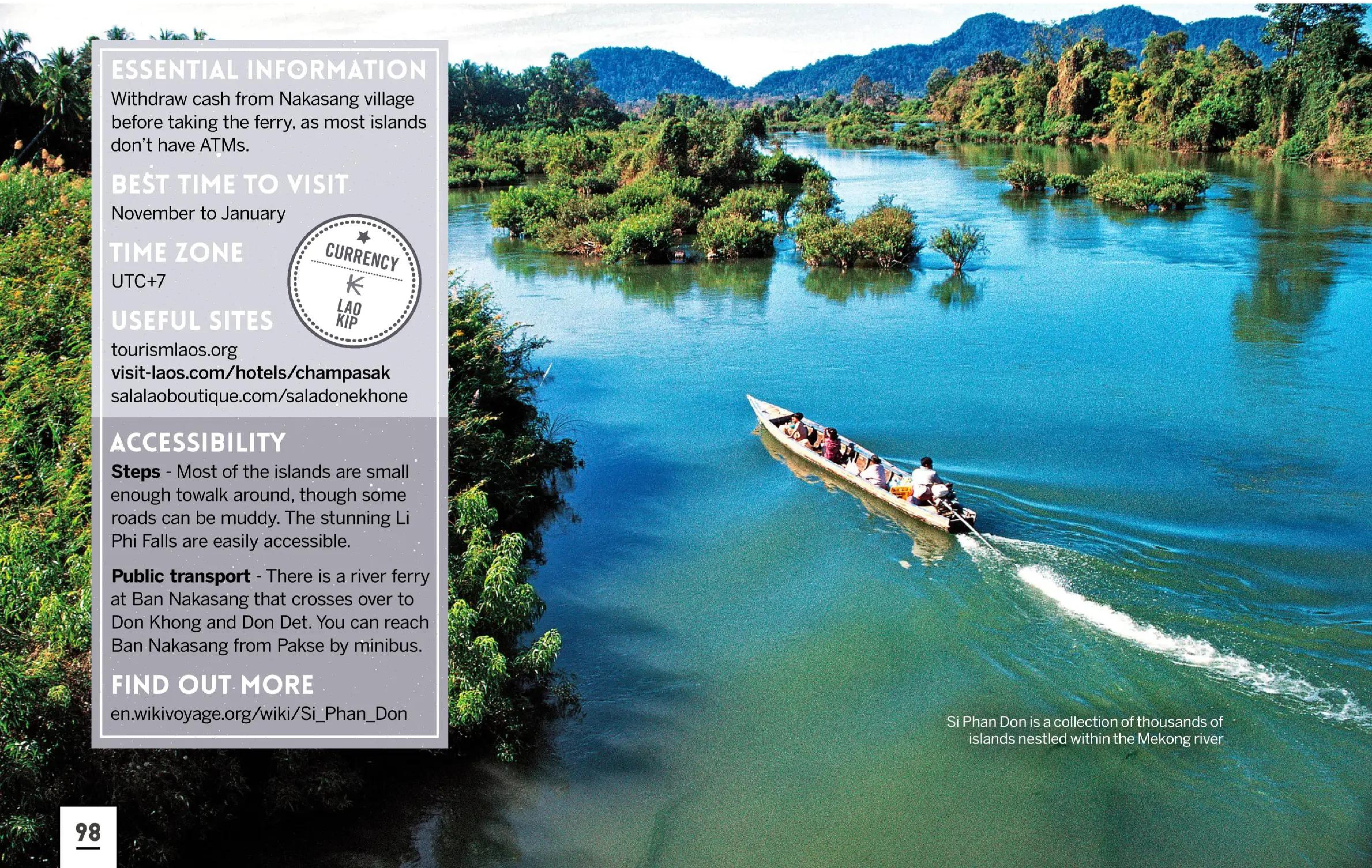
Among Don Khong's 100 mountain tops, there are many nooks and crannies to explore. Half a mile north of Muang Khong, just a short, shaded walk off the beaten track, via banana plantation, is Tham Phu Khiaw, or Green Mountain Cave. A humble collection of Buddhist iconography, many make regular pilgrimages to the sanctuary.

The island's oldest temple can be found in the Ban Xieng Wang community. A cycle through the bamboo groves and farms north of Muang Khong, Wat Jom Thong is marked by a triple-gated entrance. This opens up to a cruciform temple hall of brick and stucco, topped with tiled roof and woodwork engraved with beasts.

Among the 14 other gorgeous temples on the island is Wat Phu Khao Kaew. The shrine provides a surreal juxtaposition to the unruly terrain, with a small red and gold stupa, alongside a large reclining Buddha. The temple is believed to have been built on holy ground, pre-Khmer ruins, atop the nest of a fearsome Naga river serpent.

Alongside the island's indigenous history, it also bears mementos of its French occupation. Don Khong History Museum occupies a two-storey former colonial building. The local governor who built it in 1935 lavished it with the name Sathanavoudthi, or 'Garden of Eden' – more commonly referred to by locals as 'Brick House'. Restored in 2010, it is now a tiny museum, with a small curation of musical instruments, antique furniture and photographs of the Don Khon railway.

A FUN HIKING TRAIL FOLLOWS THE OLD FRENCH RAILROAD



Si Phan Don is a collection of thousands of islands nestled within the Mekong river

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Withdraw cash from Nakasang village before taking the ferry, as most islands don't have ATMs.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to January

TIME ZONE

UTC+7

CURRENCY
₭
LAO KIP

USEFUL SITES

tourismlaos.org
visit-laos.com/hotels/champasak
salalaoboutique.com/saladonekhone

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Most of the islands are small enough towalk around, though some roads can be muddy. The stunning Li Phi Falls are easily accessible.

Public transport - There is a river ferry at Ban Nakasang that crosses over to Don Khong and Don Det. You can reach Ban Nakasang from Pakse by minibus.

FIND OUT MORE

en.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Si_Phan_Don

With more than 1,100 species of fish, the Mekong River provides a much-needed lifeline to the otherwise landlocked Laos

Perhaps the most touristy of Si Phan Don's islands is Don Det, whose northwest bar district has earned itself 'party island' status. Though some sell hallucinogenic cocktails and snacks, it hardly rivals the debauchery of Vang Vieng, with most establishments shutting shop before midnight. Whether soaking in the sunset from the swaying embrace of a hammock, or throwing back rice at a family-run restaurant in the south, Don Det is the perfect place to slow down and switch off. Amidst the slumber, the island allows tired visitors to explore the Mekong River, in perhaps the laziest way possible: riding down it in a rubber ring. Alternatively, more adventurous types can battle the currents by kayak. There's plenty of shoreline to explore, and the western coast watches over some spectacular sunsets.

Ferries also set off from Don Det port to the nearby islands of Don Loppadi, Don Sang Pai and Don Phi Man. The journey there soaks in the ambience of the archipelago's stoic islands, uninhabited clusters of paradise, kept greedily from the outside world by the flowing Mekong. Cycling the three islands is an opportunity to immerse yourself in nature; to watch the sun dance over the flies, and the wind stroke past the paddy fields.

The islands of Si Phan Don are covered in banana trees, coconut palms and rolling meadows, ripe for exploration

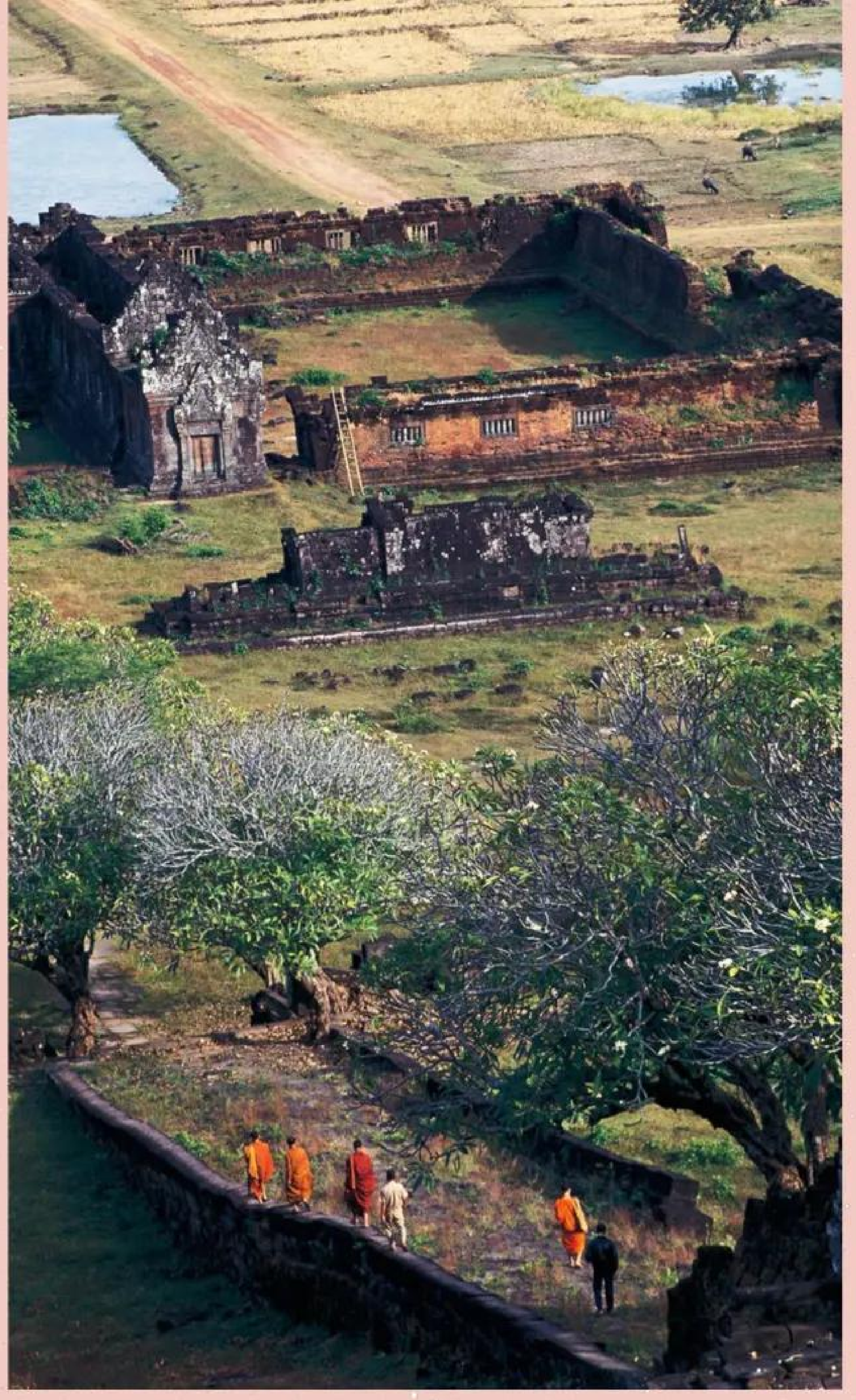
The last major island of Don Khon can be reached by foot, over the old French railway bridge linking it with Don Det. Just four kilometres (2.5 miles) long and 2.89 kilometres (1.8 miles) wide, the forested island is marked by its banyan trees and sandy beaches.

It is also home to Tat Somphamit, sometimes referred to as 'Li Phi' or 'Spirit Trap', a network of waterfalls and rapids the locals believe catch evil spirits. Undeterred, mortal fishermen mimic tightrope walkers, edging along bamboo scaffolds to collect their fish traps.

North of the falls is the island's colourfully painted Buddhist monastery, Wat Khon Tai. Built over an ancient Hindu site, it features a modern temple and steeple, alongside an old ordination hall, a crumbling stupa, with exposed red brick, and ancient stones – including an old Khmer shivalinga (abstract representation of Shiva).

A fun hiking trail follows the old French railroad, bookended by rusting trains, built in the 19th century to navigate supplies around the rapids from Don Khon to Don Det. The tracks have been replaced by roads, but placards across the island outline the history of the railway. The trail passes an overgrown Christian cemetery, and the tomb of a French family, who all died on the same day in 1922.

The local fishermen who frequent Xai Kong Nyai Beach are happy to take visitors to see the waterfalls, and even the dolphins, in their longtail boats. With the sun melting over the horizon, to the clicks and soft splashes of Irrawaddy dolphins, Si Phan Don feels like a world where time turns into an abstract concept – and the moment is all that matters.



PITSTOPS

The best way to reach Si Phan Don is from Pakse International Airport, however no trip to the province is complete without a stop at Don Daeng, a short detour along the way. Just off Champasak village, Don Daeng is a perfect introduction to Laotian island life, with its towering palms, sleepy villages and rolling farms.

Across the river, the 1,000-year-old, UNESCO-protected Vat Phou temple complex sits at the base of a mountain. Preserving the architectural wonders of the Khmer Empire, the intricate development emphasises the Hindu relationship between human and nature; with temples, shrines and waterworks stretched in geometric patterns across ten kilometres (six miles) of mountain top and river bank.

The launching-off point for Si Phan Don is Nakasang village, which is just a short drive away from Khone Phapheng – the largest waterfall system in Southeast Asia. Here, daredevil fishermen tiptoe across precarious bamboo scaffolds, hopping alongside the waterfall. Visitors can watch from a safer distance from one of the park's various viewing platforms.

The launching-off point for Si Phan Don is Nakasang village. Small ferries line up here, preparing to set off for Muang Khong, the eastern town on Si Phan Don's largest island, Don Khong

San Giulio Island in Lake Orta

AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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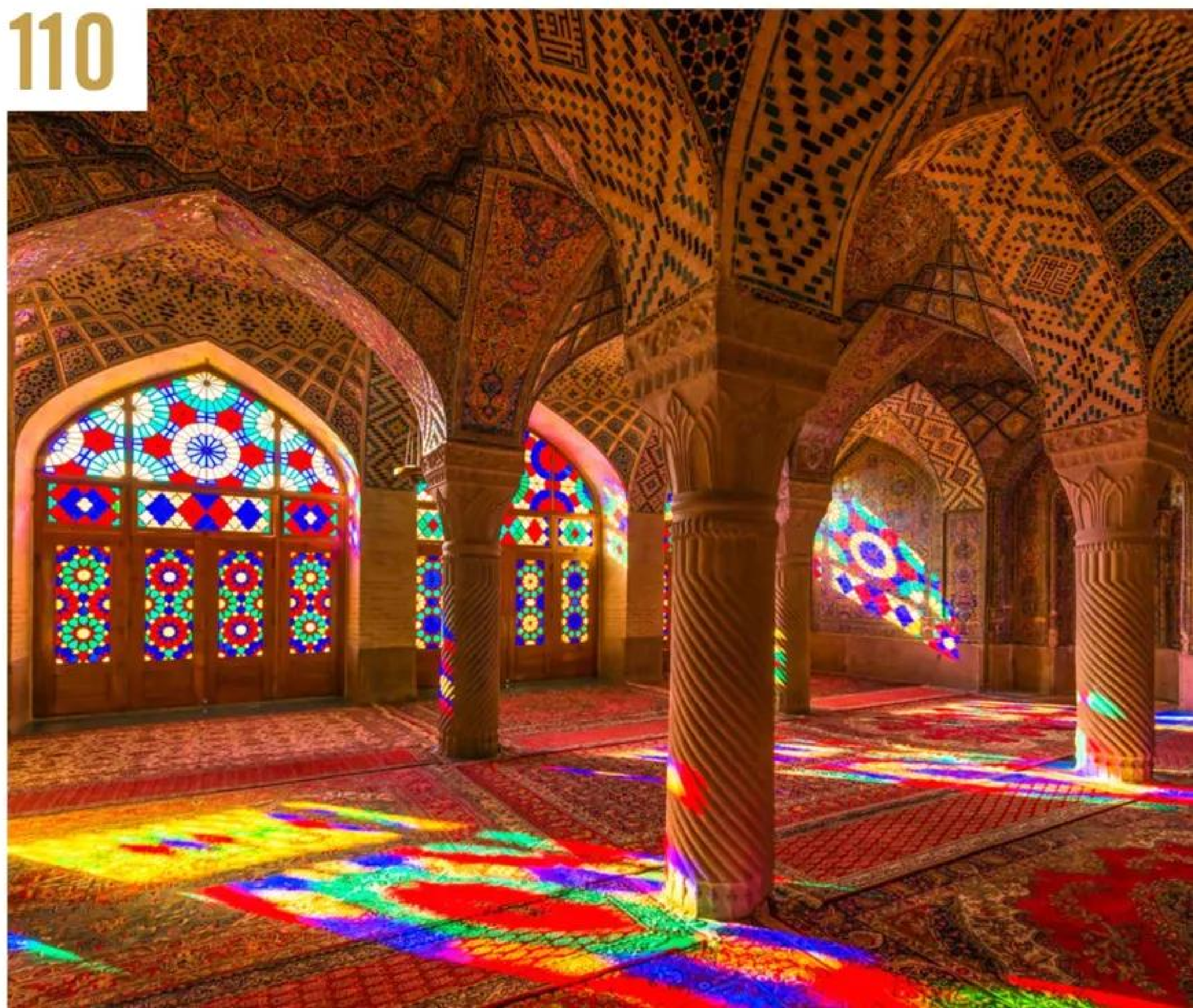


For more than 1,000 years, Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was the Cathedral of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Take care on the roads and always co-operate with the Turkish authorities.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to November

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

CURRENCY
₺
TURKISH LIRA

USEFUL SITES

hagiasophia.com
ayasofyamuzesi.gov.tr/en
howtoistanbul.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The thresholds are fitted with ramps, and the ground floor is flat. The upper level is only reachable by stairs and a cobbled passageway.

Public transport - Istanbul's tram system is well-designed, with most station platforms aligned up with the vehicle doors.

FIND OUT MORE

sagetraveling.com/Disabled-Access-at-the-Hagia-Sophia

68 HAGIA SOPHIA

Visit one of the oldest extant symbols of the Byzantine Empire in Turkey

The phrase 'third time lucky' could so easily have been coined for Hagia Sophia – a magnificent former place of worship that ended up being built three times. But the luck is actually with those who set eyes upon the final form we see today, for the ancient domes and minarets of this church-cum-mosque-cum-museum are a truly historic sight to behold.

Anyone standing and gazing upon this stunning landmark as it pierces the clear, blue sky of Istanbul is bearing witness to some 1,480 years of history. After all, Hagia Sophia is rightly considered to be one of the world's greatest man-made monuments, sitting proud in the city's Sultanahmet district as a symbol of past Byzantine might. It also bears the strong stamp of the 15th-century Ottoman invasion.

To that end, exploring Hagia Sophia is nothing short of a true delight. It's a shame that there are no remnants of the original Greek Orthodox Christian Church that was constructed in 360 CE by Konstantios, a ruler in the Byzantine period – only to be burned to the ground following a riot 44 years later. Likewise, there are no remains of the building that subsequently re-emerged in 415 CE thanks to the efforts of Emperor Theodosius II – a structure that was later demolished following another riot.

What does exist, though, is simply jaw-dropping: a building in the image of Emperor Justinian I that was constructed between 532 and 537 CE in a city that was then called Constantinople. This was the place where new emperors were crowned in lavish ceremonies, and from where East Roman culture and politics flourished. It was the Empire Church and, as such, it was designed to be as opulent as it could possibly be.

How else to explain the building's huge 32-metre (105-foot) main dome, which is 56 metres (18 feet) from the floor and lets light reflect across the nave's interior? Or the columns and marbles taken from ancient cities around Syria and Anatolia? As a basilica, it was and remains filled with wonder. The impressive mosaics of the winged angels that cover the dome's supporting arches, and the 104 columns imported from the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, bear witness to that.

What is also striking is Hagia Sophia's size. When it was completed, it was the largest building in the known world, but it became even bigger when it was turned into an Ottoman imperial mosque following the invasion of 1432. The Ottomans fortified the structure, added supporting pillars, and complemented the building with four minarets as they set about an impressive Islamic refit. Yet they retained aspects of Christianity, such as a large mosaic of the Virgin and Child.

Today, thanks to the actions of the Turkish president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1934, the building is secular. It was turned into a museum the following year and opened to tourists who flock in their hundreds of thousands. Even so, there is a groundswell of opinion in Turkey that it should become a mosque once more, whwich might limit visiting opportunities in the future. Time to go, then, before the luck runs out.

69 VICTORIA FALLS

Take the plunge in southern Africa at the world's largest waterfall

Before you even reach Victoria Falls – the spectacular 108-metre (354-foot) waterfall on the Zambezi River in southern Africa – you will see huge columns of spray rising some 500 metres (1,640 feet) into the air. You'll also hear the incredible thunder of the water as it cascades over the lip of a large basalt plateau. Little wonder the original name for this unique sight was Mosi-oa-Tunya, which literally means 'the smoke that thunders'.

Victoria Falls got its name thanks to the Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone in 1855, in honour of Queen Victoria. It straddles the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe, where it is bound by low sandstone hills. It turns a generally placid river into a pounding torrent, as more than 500 million cubic metres of water plunge into the gorge.

It's something of a natural foaming monster that oozes beauty not only in its own splendour, but also in the rainbows that it forms in the dazzling sunlight. It can be a little frightening in its scale, but there are inviting spots close by for the brave, particularly on the Zambian side near to the 'devil's cascade', where you can enjoy a crystal-clear, natural swimming pool.

There is also a jaw-dropping bungee-jumping location if you're feeling particularly daredevil. For this, you'd join around 50,000 people each year in leaping from a British-built road and rail bridge overlooking the waterfall, cutting through the mists as you hurtle towards the Zambezi River, saved only by the rebound of the cord as the adrenaline pumps inside your body.

The curtain of falling water can be otherwise observed as you wander along a path along the forest edge, pausing at the Knife Edge Bridge for a perfect view of the Eastern Cataract and the experience of the upward shooting spray. A rain coat is a useful accessory, as is a head for heights since you'll be 128 metres (420 feet) above the river. Meanwhile, in the dry season, there is also a chance to walk along the top of the Eastern Cataract and enjoy the same view Livingstone had way back when.

For the rest of the year, there is no such opportunity, as the water roars at its splendid best. But hike down the gorge, underneath the Victoria Falls Bridge, and you'll be able to see the cascading water from the base – a spectacular viewpoint, although it's certainly not a journey for the unfit since it takes you across some hazardous terrain, and involves some swimming and rafting.

A good alternative is to take a helicopter ride to see the falls in their glory from above or visit the various museums to get a sense of history in the area. The Victoria Falls Field Museum reveals the formation of the falls and the heritage of the region, while the David Livingstone Museum houses a huge range of memorabilia, from authentic maps to diaries.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

A visa is needed to cross from Zimbabwe and Zambia.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

February and March

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY
$
ZIMBABWEAN DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

livingstonetourism.com/the-victoria-falls/
places.co.za/html/victoria-falls.html
zambiatourism.com/destinations/waterfalls/victoria-falls/

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Access to the falls is wheelchair-friendly from the town on the Zimbabwean side, and the town is only a short walk away.

Public transport - There is a free shuttle that runs hourly from most hotels to the city centre, or the falls. There are also tours available.

FIND OUT MORE

wild-wings-safaris.com/africa-travel-guide/victoria-falls

70 MARRAKESH

Get lost in Morocco's cultural capital in the Sahara sands

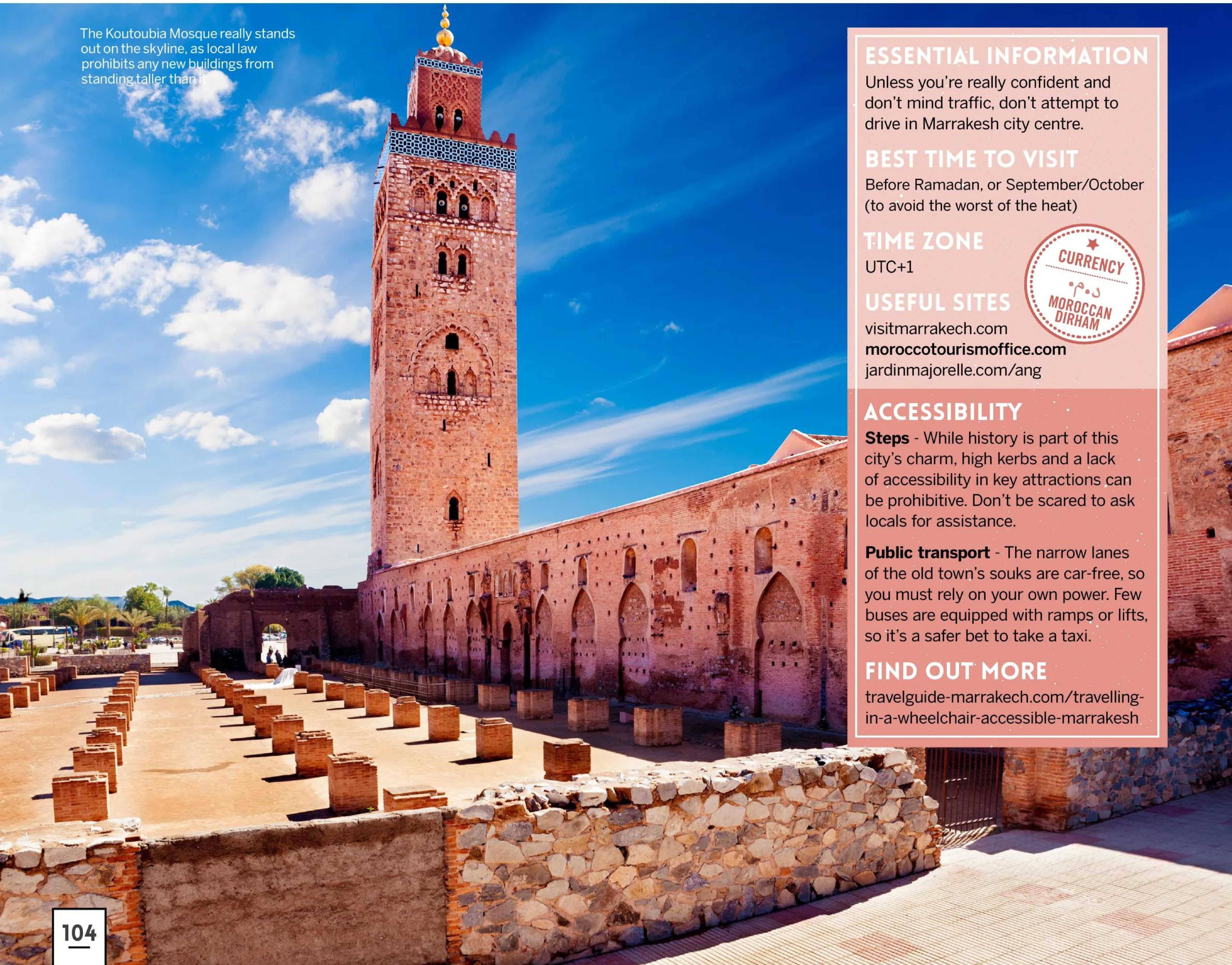
With its sand-coloured buildings, bustling streets and colourful markets, Marrakesh is Morocco's cultural jewel. Located in the shade of the stunning Atlas Mountains, at the very edge of the Sahara Desert, it has been home to a vast variety of people over the ages – from native Berbers to Arabs, as well as French colonisers and folk coming from all over Africa. The result is a real melting pot of influences – and it really shows.

Officially founded in the 11th century by the Almoravid Berber chieftain Abu Bakr ibn Umar, Marrakesh became a cultural centre, as its rulers erected a number of stunning mosques and madrasas (centres for Islamic learning). Over the years, its reputation spread across Africa, and people came from all over the continent to trade goods with each other.

Sticking up in the Marrakesh skyline is the minaret of the Koutoubia Mosque, located at the very centre of the city – Marrakesh seems to sprawl out around it. If you think you've seen it before, you probably have – the minaret served as an inspiration for La Giralda's cathedral spire in Seville. Opened in the 12th century, it was built next to the king's residence, and designed so that nosy worshippers couldn't get a look into his private quarters from the minaret. Inside, there are six rooms, each with its own architectural style. The grounds of the mosque feature destroyed ancient foundations (with information boards to tell their story), as well as expansive gardens with tall palm trees fanning the pathways.

Seeking to build upon Marrakesh's lofty reputation as an intellectual hub, Saadian dynasty sultan Abdallah al-Ghalib embarked on a massive construction project in 1565: the Ben Youssef Madrasa. At the time, it was the largest Islamic study centre in all Morocco, said to accommodate up to 800 students. As well as Quranic teachings, students learned about literature, history and science. The buildings are centred around a stunningly symmetrical courtyard, featuring a classically Moroccan reflecting pool, and the walls are adorned with beautiful Islamic geometric patterns. Besides the educational buildings, you can also look around the student living quarters, perhaps to see how they compare with modern-day dorms. Much better, probably.

Built by Abdallah al-Ghalib's successor, Ahmad al-Mansur, the El Badi Palace ruins are another must-see. In its heyday, the palace was easily the grandest in the city, built using costly materials such as onyx and gold. Archaeologists estimate that the palace once had 360 rooms, playing host to political intrigues, private scandals and foreign dignitaries from far and wide. After the fall of the Saadian dynasty, their



The Koutoubia Mosque really stands out on the skyline, as local law prohibits any new buildings from standing taller than it

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Unless you're really confident and don't mind traffic, don't attempt to drive in Marrakesh city centre.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Before Ramadan, or September/October (to avoid the worst of the heat)

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

CURRENCY
د.م.
MOROCCAN DIRHAM

USEFUL SITES

visitmarrakech.com
moroccotourismoffice.com
jardinmajorelle.com/ang

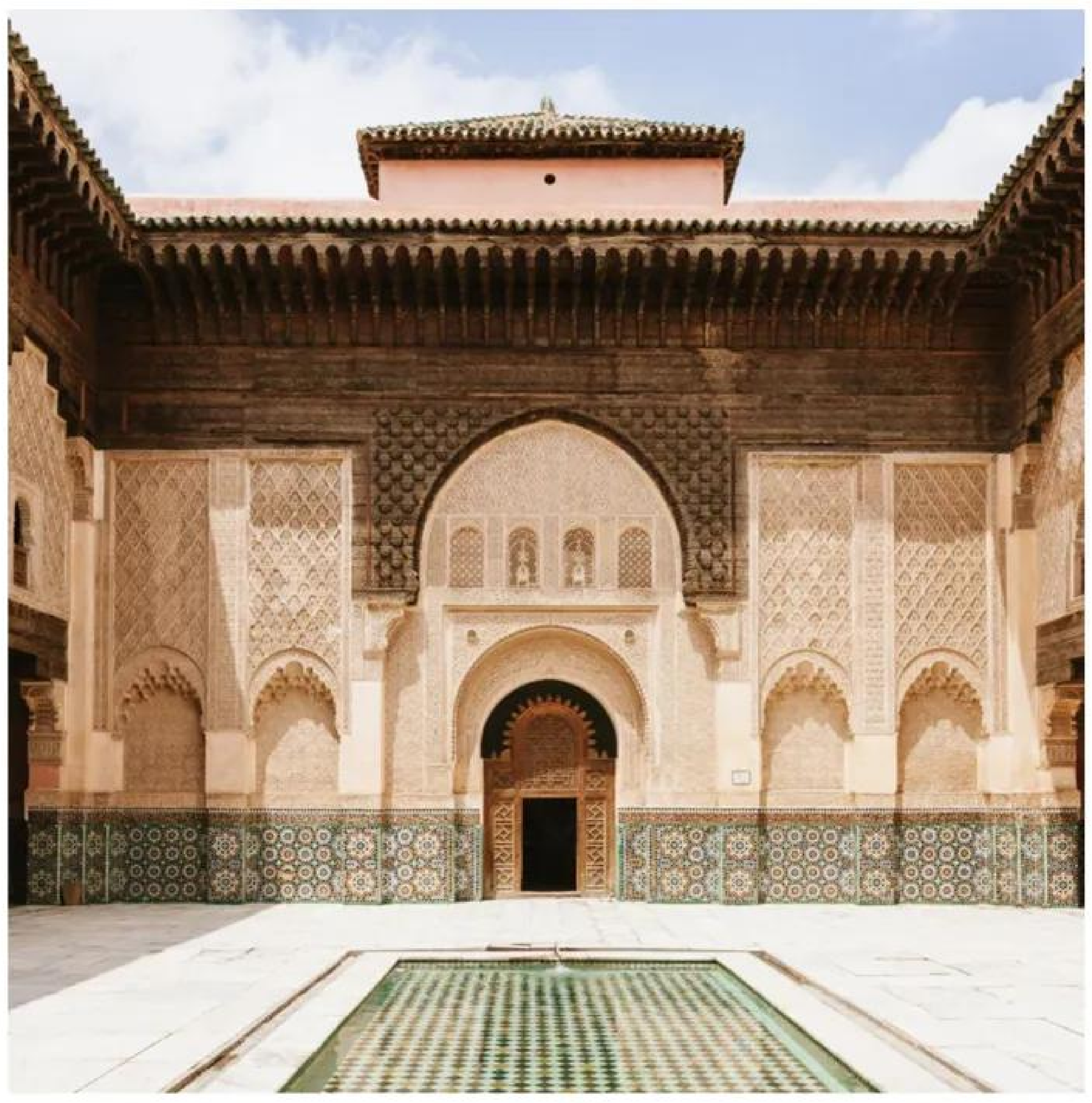
ACCESSIBILITY

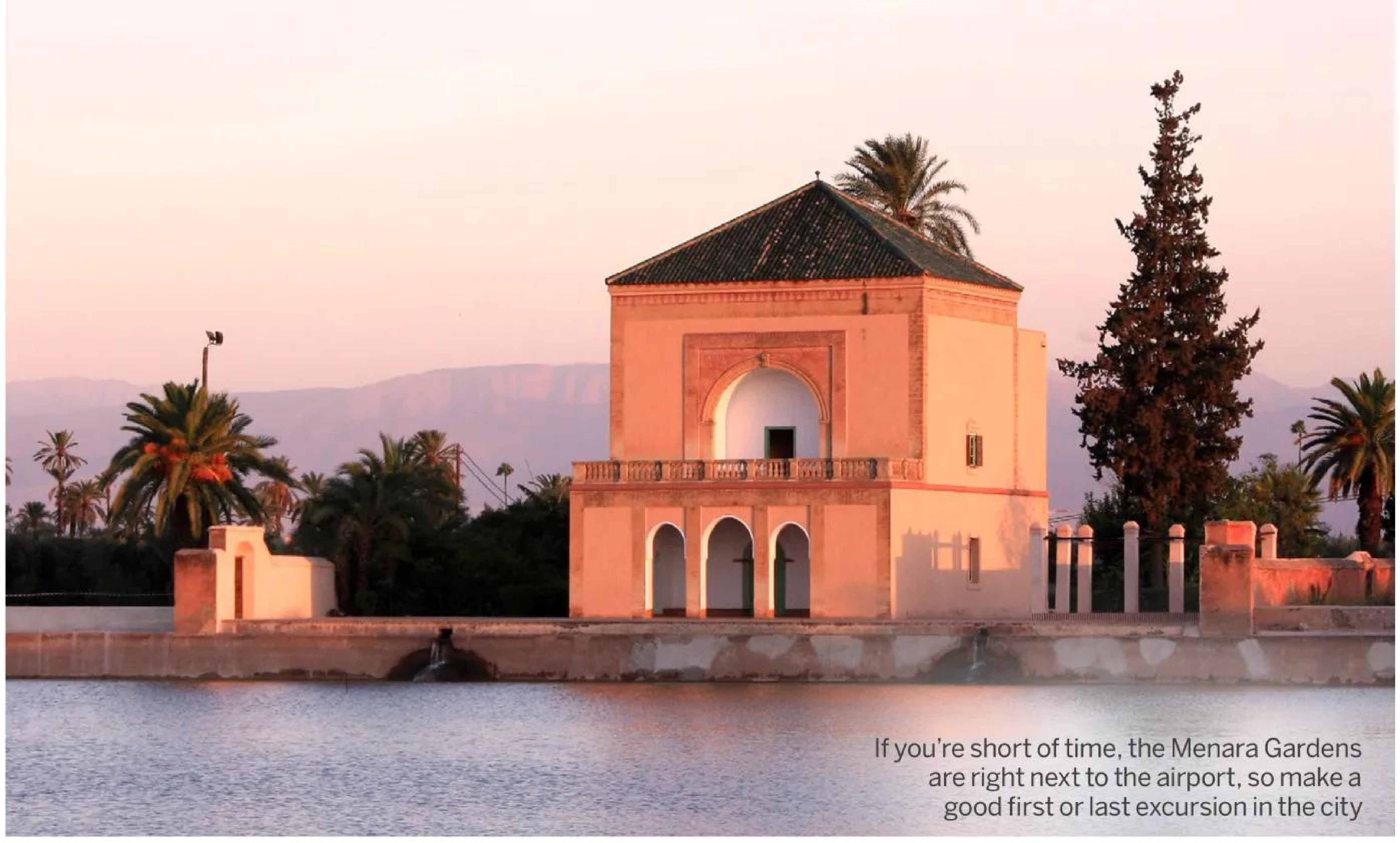
Steps - While history is part of this city's charm, high kerbs and a lack of accessibility in key attractions can be prohibitive. Don't be scared to ask locals for assistance.

Public transport - The narrow lanes of the old town's souks are car-free, so you must rely on your own power. Few buses are equipped with ramps or lifts, so it's a safer bet to take a taxi.

FIND OUT MORE

travelguide-marrakech.com/travelling-in-a-wheelchair-accessible-marrakesh





If you're short of time, the Menara Gardens are right next to the airport, so make a good first or last excursion in the city

TRY TO GRAB A GOOD DEAL BY GIVING HAGGLING A GO AT THE FAMOUS SOUK

Alaouite successors stripped the palace of anything valuable, and left it to rot. Today, its ruins are carefully preserved.

Follow Ahmad al-Mansur to the grave by visiting the Saadian tombs, another major landmark on the Marrakesh trail. The tombs are the final resting place of al-Mansur and his family, as well as some servants and soldiers. Constructed from dazzling Italian marble, it's surprising to learn that these beautiful royal tombs were hidden from the world for centuries. The Saadians' vanquishers, the Alaouites, were keen to downplay their predecessors' influence, so the tombs were walled up. The only way to get to them was through a small passageway in the Kasbah Mosque, accessible only to a few. However, thanks to newly invented aerial photography, the tombs were discovered from above in 1917. Since then, they've been lovingly restored to their former glory, and you're able to wander around them at your leisure.

Marrakesh's rulers, no matter which dynasty they hailed from, seem to have been avid gardeners. They built many lovely green spaces throughout the city. Arguably the most famous of these is the Menara botanical gardens, a little way out of the city centre – right next to the airport, in fact, so it's a good idea to stop here if you're short of time. Among the fruit orchards and olive trees, a golden Saadian-era pavilion overlooks a rectangular reflecting pool. It's best to visit the Menara gardens in the evening, if you can – that way, you'll see the gardens bathed in a warm sunset glow. On a clear day, you'll be able to see the snow-capped Atlas Mountains in the background – the perfect spot for taking some great photos.

Jump forward in time a few centuries to capture a shot of your own at one of Marrakesh's most-Instagrammed landmarks, the Bahia Palace. Walk through its halls to experience all the different eras in Marrakesh's past – although the palace was built in the 19th century, its builder, Si Moussa, wanted to showcase the best of his country's history. Inside, you'll find a homage to traditional Moroccan styles, including sandstone walls, geometric marble rooms and colourful Islamic art. The gardens are even better – there are numerous courtyards filled with palm trees, water features and brightly coloured stained-glass windows to admire. The pièce de résistance, however, is the final courtyard, a vast expanse of intricate tiling; blue, yellow and red ceiling decorations; and picturesque fountains scattered with delicate pink petals. You could spend an afternoon here, soaking up the sun and basking in the beauty of Moroccan design.

For a taste of modernist Marrakesh, step inside the walled Majorelle Gardens – otherwise known as the Yves Saint-Laurent gardens, after the famous French designer led efforts to restore the gardens in the 1980s. Originally laid out in the 1930s, the gardens, known for their trademark cobalt buildings and terracotta pathways, are unique because they blend traditional Moroccan landscaping with unmistakeably European architecture. The bright-blue Cubist villa (which now houses the Berber museum) at the top of the gardens looks like it would be more at home on the French Riviera than in Marrakesh. Still, you'll never forget the incredible colour scheme and botany on show here.

Last but certainly not least on the Marrakesh itinerary is a trip to the famous souk – and we suggest you do save it until last, otherwise you might spend all your money here! Entering from Jemaa el-Fnaa square, apparently Africa's busiest square, explore the endless narrow passageways packed full of exciting goods and wares. As well as standard souvenirs, you'll find all manner of spices, food, traditional cooking items (yes, including tagines), furniture, clothing and even books here. Try to grab a good deal by giving haggling a go – but be warned, Marrakesh's market sellers drive a famously hard bargain!

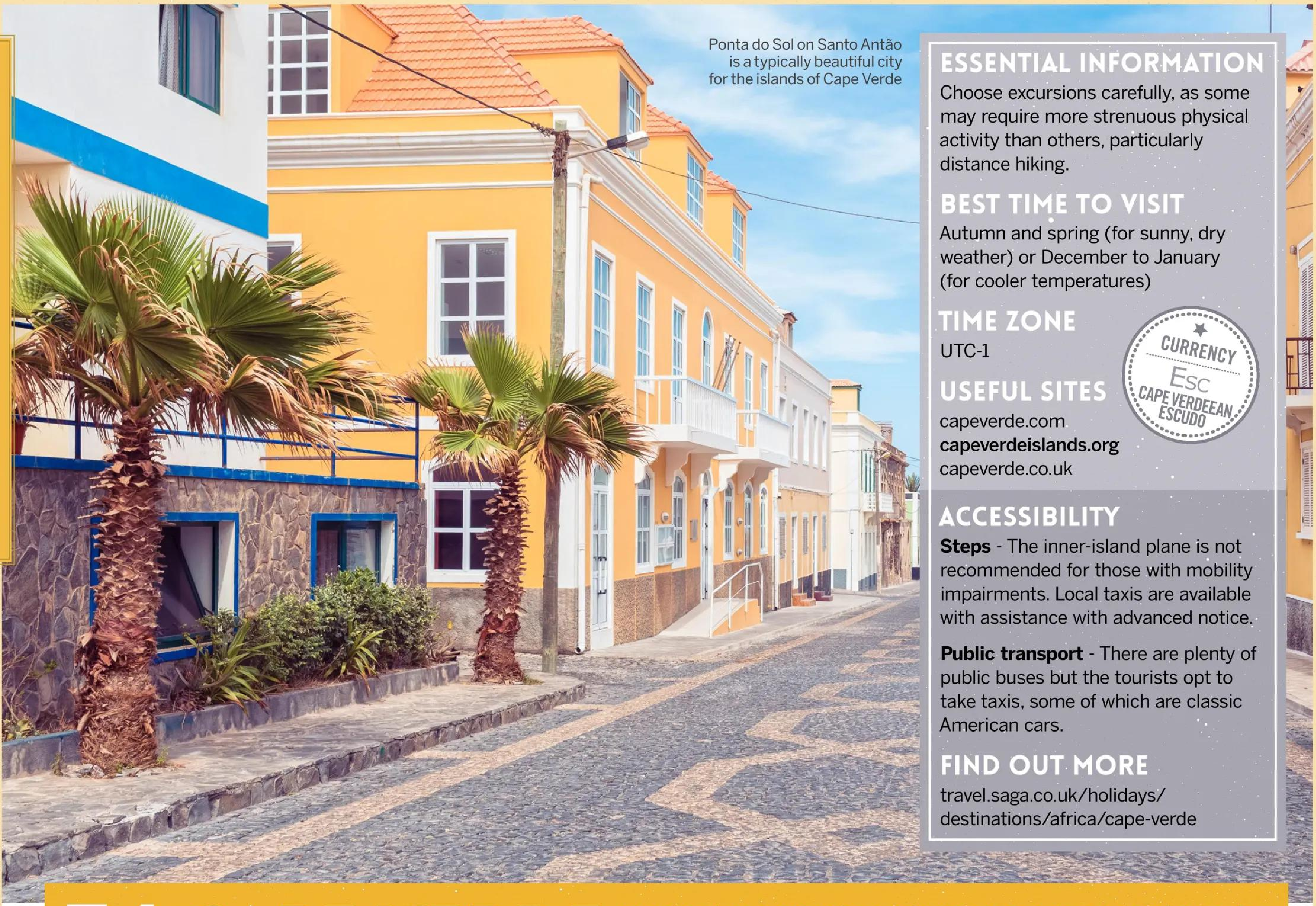
The Jardin Majorelle was one of Yves Saint-Laurent's favourite Marrakesh haunts

MODERN-DAY MARRAKESH

Although Marrakesh's old character is part of its charm, you can also take advantage of the city's modern side. As well as top-of-the-range hotels with rooftop pools and romantic spots ideal for sipping cocktails, you'll also find an array of cultural pleasures to take your fancy. Visit the House of Photography to learn more about this useful art, or the Yves Saint-Laurent Museum to find out about the notable designer.

Or, if you tire of souk shopping and want nothing more than to grab a coffee and hit up the boutiques, visit the Carré Eden shopping mall in the trendy neighbourhood of Gueliz. You'll find it very close to Marrakesh's shiny new train station, which was built in 2008.

To end your day in modern-day Marrakesh, enjoy one of Morocco's best-known pastimes: a visit to the hammam. Though these spas have their origins in Ottoman bathing, their popularity in Morocco has soared, in part thanks to the country's tourist boom. Enjoy a massage for a fraction of the price you'd pay at home, then take a dip in a blue pool, surrounded by sensual aromas and ambient lighting.



Ponta do Sol on Santo Antão is a typically beautiful city for the islands of Cape Verde

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Choose excursions carefully, as some may require more strenuous physical activity than others, particularly distance hiking.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Autumn and spring (for sunny, dry weather) or December to January (for cooler temperatures)

TIME ZONE

UTC-1

CURRENCY

Esc

CAPE VERDEEAN ESCUDO

USEFUL SITES

capeverde.com
capeverdeislands.org
capeverde.co.uk

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The inner-island plane is not recommended for those with mobility impairments. Local taxis are available with assistance with advanced notice.

Public transport - There are plenty of public buses but the tourists opt to take taxis, some of which are classic American cars.

FIND OUT MORE

travel.saga.co.uk/holidays/destinations/africa/cape-verde

71 CAPE VERDE

Brilliant sunshine and cultural diversity await on this African archipelago

Perhaps best described as the African Caribbean, the Cape Verde islands – a cluster of ten specks of land about 500 kilometres (311 miles) from the Senegalese coast of West Africa – bring leisure, romance and carefree days to life. And for those seeking adventure, Cape Verde does not disappoint.

While tourism is a relatively recent development in the islands, they have not remained 'undiscovered'. Thousands of travellers are experiencing the charms of Cape Verde and its varied offerings. Pristine, sandy beaches blend with stunning, panoramic views of volcanic formations, azure seas and sunny skies. Formed millions of years ago by tremendous volcanic activity, the islands reveal their heritage in landscapes not unlike the surface of the moon. Their people bring customs and traditions to life with a zest and colour that are reminiscent of the Caribbean isles of Jamaica or the Dominican Republic.

The largest of the islands, Sal, encompasses 220 square kilometres (85 square miles). Dotted with quaint settlements and the shopping mecca of Santa Maria on its southern shore, Sal is the most popular destination for those seeking a blend of culture, sun and breathtaking vistas. Stroll along the streets and duck into a shop selling local crafts and wares, dine in an outdoor café, and experience the spice and verve of local cuisine. Then head to the beaches along the inviting shoreline. A ribbon of soft sand stretches eight kilometres (five miles), and lively surf beckons sun worshippers.

The island of Boa Vista is the choice for many, as 55 kilometres (34 miles) of soft, white sand extend beyond the horizon and nestle against the deep blue of the Atlantic Ocean. Possibly the most captivating beach in all the islands is Boa Vista's Praia de Chaves, five kilometres (three miles) of unspoiled, pristine natural beauty. The nearby towns of Rabil and Sal Rei provide refreshments and transportation options.

Venturing out from the cities and resorts to explore the ancient volcanic origins of the Cape Verde islands is an unforgettable experience. The small islands of Santo Antão and Fogo, literally translated from the Portuguese as 'fire', bear testimony to the birth of the islands millions of years ago. These locales are truly off the beaten path but worth the effort, and excursions are available. The active volcano of Pico do Fogo rises 2,829 metres (9,281 feet) above Fogo, and the village Chã das Caldeiras prospers within the volcano crater itself.

Given its position along oceangoing trade routes with favourable winds and currents, Cape Verde is a hotspot for those who enjoy sailing and other water-related activities. Excursions aboard schooners to varied attractions are popular among visitors. Caribbean-style culture is pervasive with colourful buildings, eclectic music and tempting cuisine.

Four international airports serve Cape Verde, the newest opening on Boa Vista in 2007. Hotels and resorts offer moderately priced or upscale accommodations in Santa Maria and Boa Vista. Consider a package that includes on-going transportation.

The islands' capital city, Praia, and the city of Mindelo are primary ports of entry, and visitors glimpse the influence of Cape Verde's Portuguese settlers with their legacy of buildings that once housed government officials. Throughout the Cape Verde islands, activities abound. Soak up the sunshine, stroll along the beaches, and discover treasures in the quaint shops that welcome visitors year-round.

72 RIVER NILE

History and beauty flow through the world's longest river in Egypt

The Nile is over 6,400 kilometres (4,000 miles) of stunning, shimmering, life-giving water. More than 300 million people rely on it for water, and so the river is lined with many of the most spectacular and important buildings and sights that Africa has to offer.

The Nile stretches all the way from Central Africa to Egypt in the north, making it the longest in the world. Although it passes through nine countries on its winding, meandering journey, it is most intrinsically linked with Egypt and the Pharaohs. Egypt's capital city, Cairo, was built on the banks of the Nile, the mighty river proving the perfect source of water and travel. There is so much to do in Cairo you could easily spend a week there, but highlights include the striking Muhammad Ali Mosque, the Khan el-Khalili souk and the Citadel, rising high over the city and providing incredible views of one of Egypt's most famous landmarks. The Giza pyramid complex is just a short journey from the Nile – where you can enjoy the sights of these iconic and breathtaking structures, as well as the Great Sphinx. The pyramids are easily accessible from the Nile, and there are huge numbers of vehicles willing to take you there.

650 kilometres (400 miles) south of Giza is Luxor, an essential part of any Nile journey. There you can visit the Valley of the Kings, the site of Tutankhamun's tomb. Also in Luxor are the Abu Simbel temples – awe-inspiring monuments dedicated to Ramesses II that were carved into the rock. The temples themselves are amazing, but even more amazing is the fact that in the 1960s, they were carved up and moved 200 metres (656 feet) inland to protect them from the Nile. They had to be moved due to the building of the Aswan Dam further downriver. You can visit this huge construction to appreciate the scale of the project, but it's not the most visually appealing megastructure.

Although the Nile is most closely linked with Egypt, there are magnificent sights to see beyond the Land of the Pharaohs. The Nile spends the first half of its life split into two: the White Nile and the Blue Nile. Khartoum in Sudan is well worth a visit to see where the two join together, while in Uganda the Murchison Falls National Park is the site of a huge 43-metre (141-foot) high waterfall. You can also see Lake Victoria, one of the sources of the Nile.

There are dozens of tour operators willing to take you on a trip down the river. Huge cruise ships sail up and down the Nile, while for a more intimate and personal experience, smaller boats and barges can be hired.

The Nile is certainly one of the world's must-see and once-in-a-lifetime destinations. The river itself is an absolute force of nature, while its banks play host to some of the globe's most legendary buildings, monuments and super-structures that simply cannot be missed.

Traverse the Nile by boat to see all it has to offer

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Many of the towns and cities along the Nile require an expert tour guide, or local friend, to navigate.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to April

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY
ج.م
EGYPTIAN POUND

USEFUL SITES

egypttoursplus.com/nile-river-tourist-attractions
egypt.travel/en/regions/nile-valley
discoveregypt.co.uk/nile-cruises

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Most of the famous sites are ground-level, though some are quite a distance from the entrance. Wheelchairs are sometimes available if you call ahead.

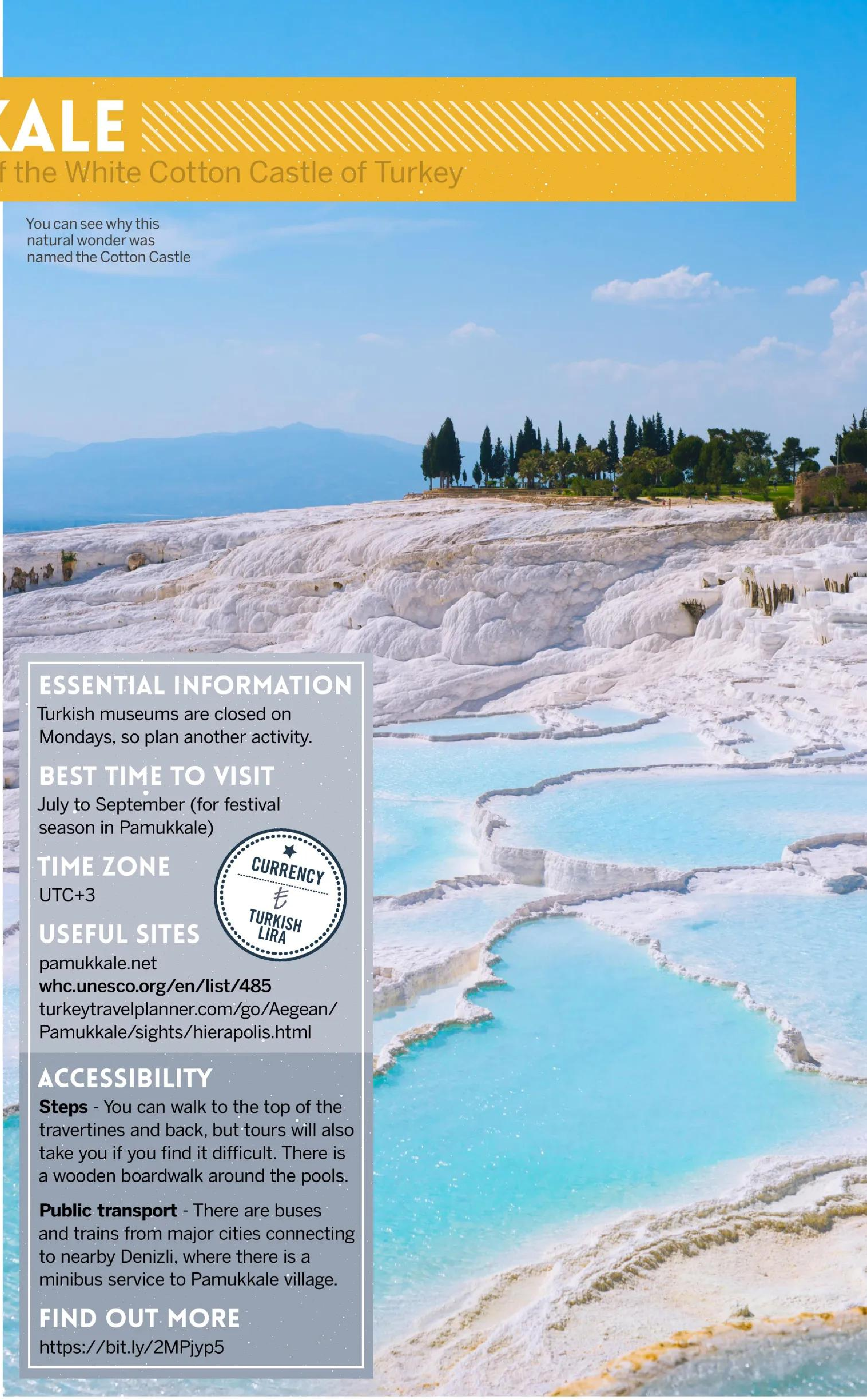
Public transport - Numerous Nile cruises now offer spacious cabins, adapted bathrooms and deck-to-deck lifts. Be prepared for narrow gangways.

FIND OUT MORE

cruisecritic.co.uk/articles.cfm?ID=1959

73 PAMUKKALE

Traverse the pools of the White Cotton Castle of Turkey



You can see why this natural wonder was named the Cotton Castle

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Turkish museums are closed on Mondays, so plan another activity.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July to September (for festival season in Pamukkale)

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

CURRENCY

₺

TURKISH LIRA

USEFUL SITES

pamukkale.net
whc.unesco.org/en/list/485
turkeytravelplanner.com/go/Aegean/Pamukkale/sights/hierapolis.html

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - You can walk to the top of the travertines and back, but tours will also take you if you find it difficult. There is a wooden boardwalk around the pools.

Public transport - There are buses and trains from major cities connecting to nearby Denizli, where there is a minibus service to Pamukkale village.

FIND OUT MORE

https://bit.ly/2MPjyp5

There are more than 1,000 UNESCO World Heritage sites around the world, but only 38 qualify as both a natural and cultural wonder. And only one of them is a stunning cascade of white, limestone pools, flowing into an ancient town with both Greek and Roman influences. That site is the unforgettable Pamukkale and Hierapolis.

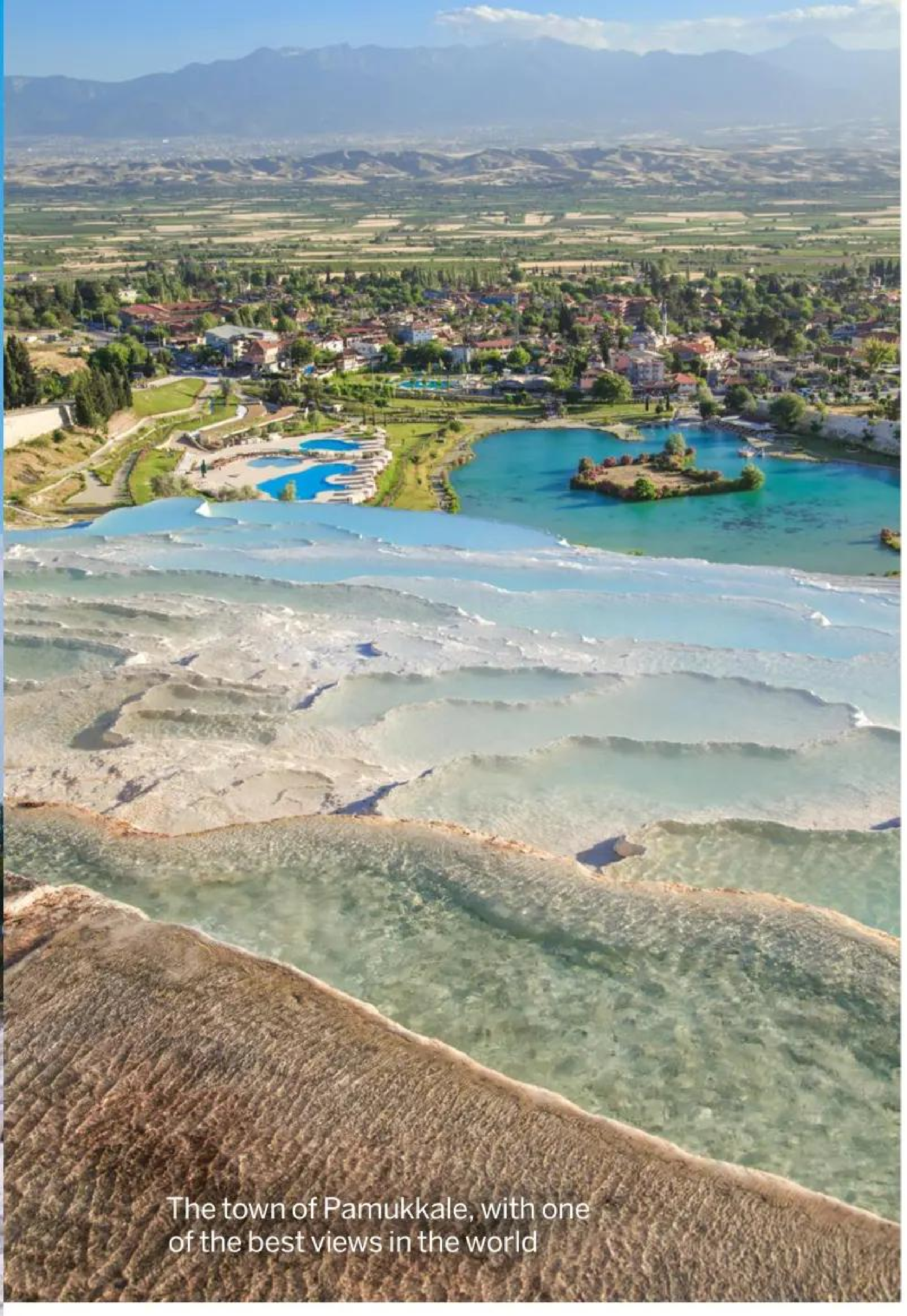
Situated in western Turkey, Pamukkale is one of the most incredible sights you'll ever lay your eyes on. For 14,000 years, natural hot springs have been pumping water loaded with calcium to the surface. As the water flowed down the valley or evaporated, calcium deposits were left, resulting in white 'steps' made of travertine, a type of limestone. These created a natural terracing down the valley. Given the name Pamukkale – 'Cotton Castle' in Turkish – by the locals, that is an extremely apt description for something that looks like it belongs in the pages of a fantasy novel.

There is simply nothing like Pamukkale anywhere in the world thanks to the unique combination of the hot springs, calcium in the ground and the valley providing the angle for the cascade to form. This natural wonder has drawn attention, partly for its sheer beauty, but also for the health benefits of bathing in mineral-rich waters. Around 2,000 years ago, the town of Hierapolis was formed at the top of Pamukkale, and the two have combined to create one of Turkey's most popular tourist destinations.

Pamukkale has to be high up on any traveller's list purely for the unique sight of those brilliant-white mini waterfalls, working their way down the valley – a sight that is truly awe-inspiring and exclusive to the area. However, there is also a rare opportunity to get up close and personal with a UNESCO World Heritage site. Many are roped off, only to be viewed from afar for safety. However, in Pamukkale you can stroll along the expanse of travertine, being asked only to give a small fee and to remove your shoes so as not to spoil the incredible structure that has been building ever since woolly mammoths strode the Earth. Not much to ask now, is it? Each step is covered with a shallow pool of warm, aquamarine water, so if anything the rules work in your favour as you are made to treat your feet to a natural foot spa.

If walking isn't your thing, you can get an amazing bird's-eye view of Pamukkale by paragliding over the site. Once you've worked up a sweat, taking in the wondrous surroundings of the Turkish landscape from the spectacular natural wonder, make your way to the top of the cascade where you can soak your tired limbs in the thermal pool that is the source of Pamukkale itself. The mineral-rich, 35-degrees-Celsius (95-degrees-Fahrenheit) water is great for easing aches and pains as well as more serious afflictions, such as rheumatism. This is no ordinary thermal pool, either. The pool, known as the Ancient Pool or Cleopatra's Pool, is shaded by cypress, oleander and palm trees, whisking you back a couple of thousand years and making that rather meagre hot tub at your hotel pale in comparison.

The rest of Hierapolis is well worth a look, as well. The town was founded in the 2nd century BCE by the Attalid kings, a Greek dynasty. The town grew around the natural hot springs, becoming wealthy due to the number of visitors who came from afar to sample the famous restorative waters of Pamukkale – much the same as what goes on today, in fact! With the fall of Greece and the rise of the Roman Empire, the Greek spas turned into Roman baths and, following a major reconstruction due to an earthquake in 60 CE, the town took on a much more Latin feel. Hierapolis means Holy City and under the Romans it became a religious


The town of Pamukkale, with one of the best views in the world

HAUNTED HIERAPOLIS

A more ghoulish attraction at Hierapolis is the Necropolis and the Ploutonion at Hierapolis. Hierapolis has one of Anatolia's largest cemeteries, with burial sites ranging from simple peasant constructions to elaborate tombs. High up the hill is the tomb of Philip the Apostle, worth a look if you have the energy. One more thing to look at but keep clear of is Pluto's Gate. In Roman times it was thought that this cave was a gate to the underworld and Pluto, with creatures dying if they went near it. Party-pooper scientists have now discovered it is simply noxious carbon dioxide that is being belched out of the ground, but the sight of this temple shrouded in darkness is still enough to make you wonder if there really is something down there to avoid.

hub. Today there are many church ruins dotted around the town that are well worth exploring. When the Romans converted to Christianity, the baths building was repurposed to become a huge church, which has in turn been transformed into an amazing archaeological museum, filled with ancient treasures.

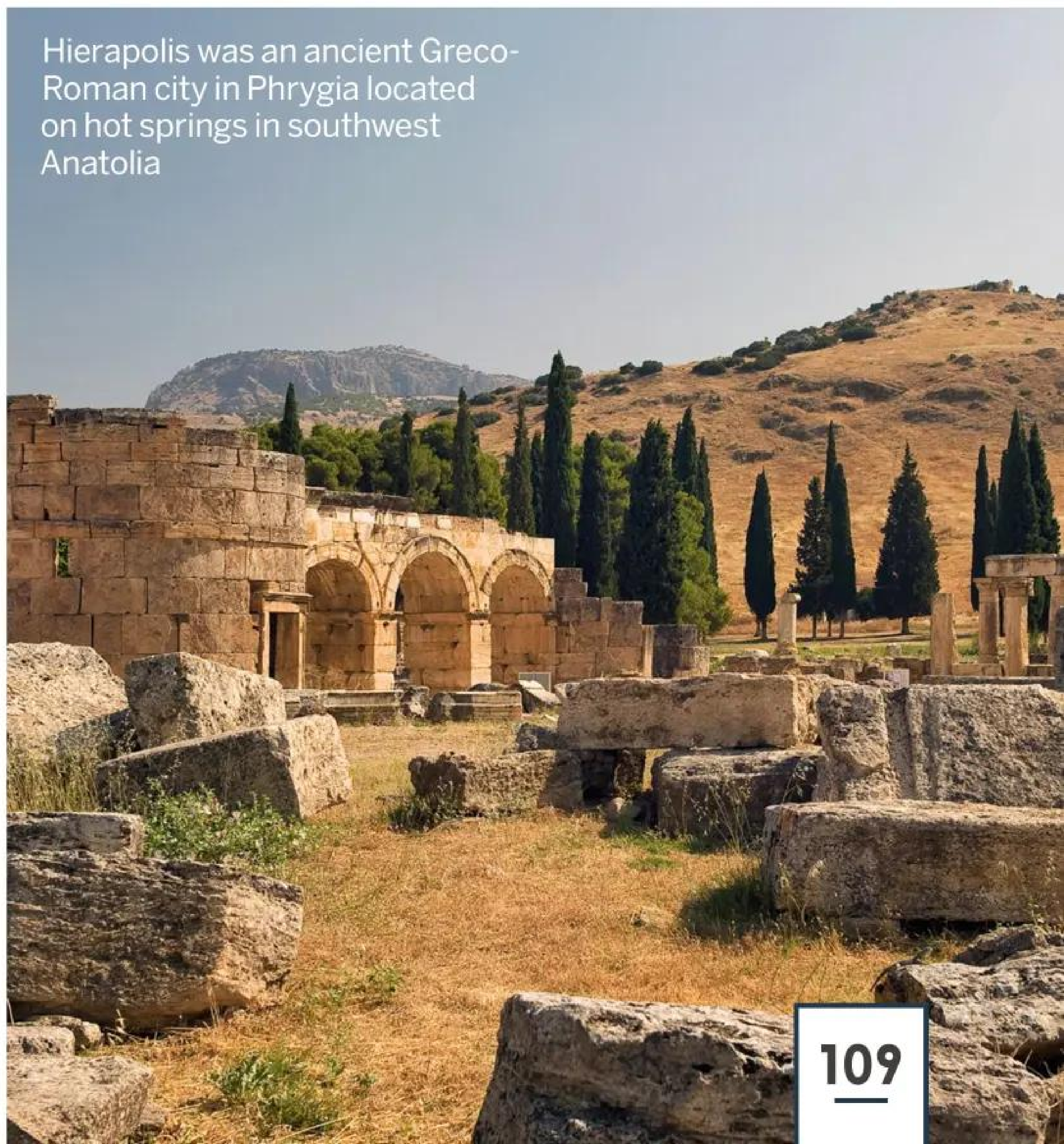
Apollo was Hierapolis's principle deity, and a temple dedicated to him was built, which is a must-see on your trip. However, being nearly two millennia old, it is unfortunately well past its prime, and is far from the spectacle it must once have been. In fact, some of the columns from the temple can be found in the Ancient Pool, so if you go for a swim, you'll literally be dipping into ancient history.

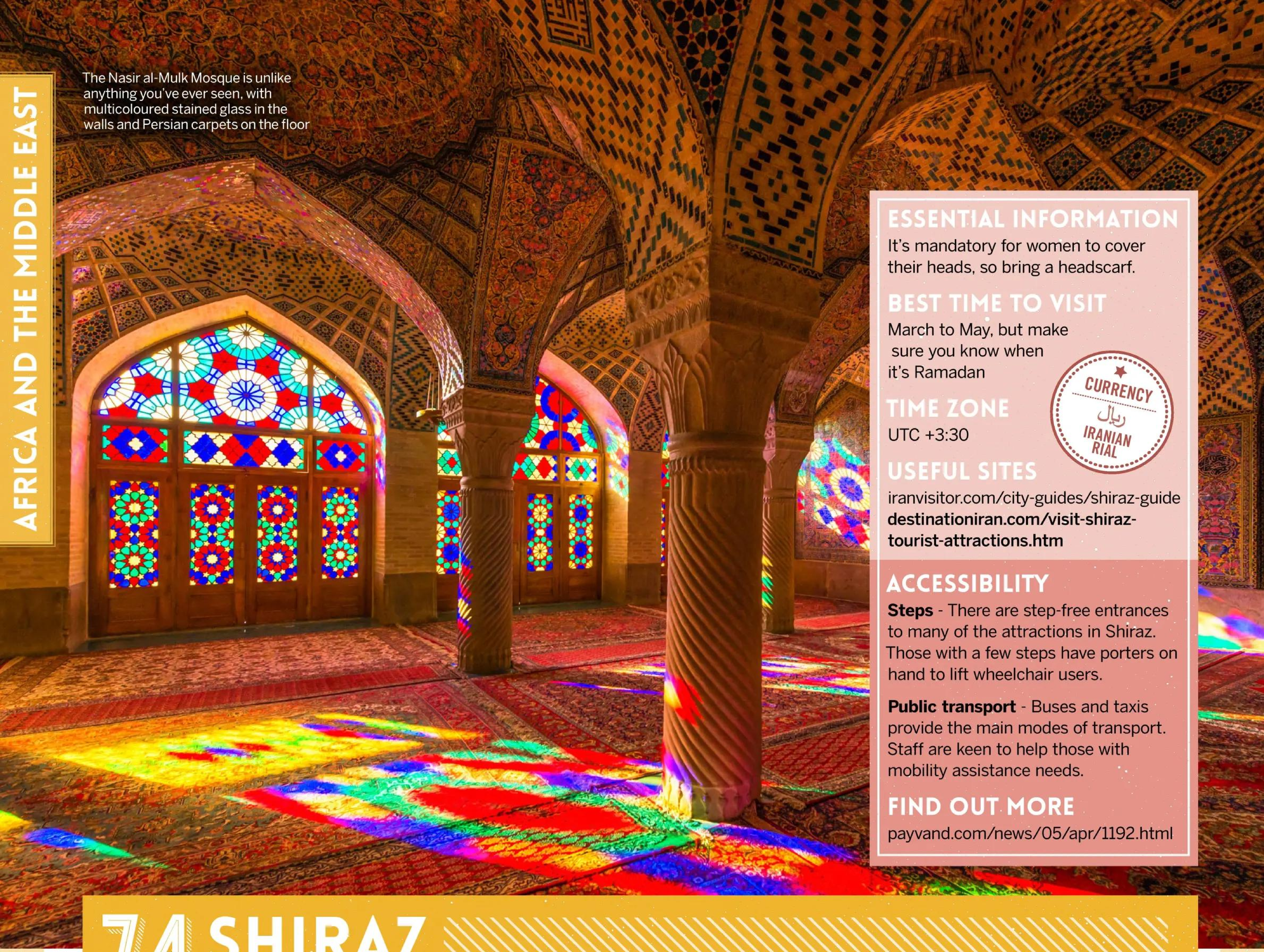
Behind the temple is another stunning sight – a Roman theatre. Built in the 2nd century CE, it may not be much to look at from the outside, but persevere and the sight down the dozens of rows of seats that was capable of holding 12,000 people is guaranteed to take your breath away. The size, the detail and the columns will instantly transport you back in time, and you can easily imagine the dramas and comedies that were performed here. Ancient audiences would have laughed, cried (or both) at the events on stage, just as we do today. Depending on how much you love ruins, Hierapolis can take anything from two hours to a whole day to explore – perfect for travellers with a loose plan who can afford to take as much or as little time as they want exploring one of the world's most staggeringly beautiful areas.

The contrast between the pristine, white terracing of Pamukkale as it gently fills up a steaming pool of water and the rugged, raw, ancient town of Hierapolis, steeped in history and wonder, is simply incredible. Two worlds collide thanks to the benevolence of our planet's geology, so for the ultimate mix of relaxation, wondrous sights, fascinating history and a truly unique experience, Pamukkale and Hierapolis has to be high up on anyone's travel bucket list.

THE COLUMNS WILL INSTANTLY TRANSPORT YOU BACK IN TIME

Imagine the plays that captivated audiences in this incredible theatre as you eat your packed lunch


Hierapolis was an ancient Greco-Roman city in Phrygia located on hot springs in southwest Anatolia



The Nasir al-Mulk Mosque is unlike anything you've ever seen, with multicoloured stained glass in the walls and Persian carpets on the floor

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

It's mandatory for women to cover their heads, so bring a headscarf.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May, but make sure you know when it's Ramadan

CURRENCY
ریال
IRANIAN RIAL

TIME ZONE

UTC +3:30

USEFUL SITES

iranvisitor.com/city-guides/shiraz-guide

destinationiran.com/visit-shiraz-tourist-attractions.htm

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - There are step-free entrances to many of the attractions in Shiraz. Those with a few steps have porters on hand to lift wheelchair users.

Public transport - Buses and taxis provide the main modes of transport. Staff are keen to help those with mobility assistance needs.

FIND OUT MORE

payvand.com/news/05/apr/1192.html

74 SHIRAZ

You may know it as a wine, but Iran's city of Shiraz is far richer than any glass

Iran might not feature high up on your travel bucket list, but it really should. This beautiful country has gained an unfair reputation since the outbreak of the 1979 Iranian Revolution – as a dangerous and lawless place, where women are oppressed, and everything that was once worthwhile has been reduced to dust. But this couldn't be further from the truth. While the Iranian government is notoriously theocratic, Iran has been a stable place in recent years, and is now mostly safe for tourists to visit.

Iran has some of the oldest historical landmarks in the world, and the city of Shiraz is right at the heart of it all. Even if you think you're accustomed to the stunning beauty of Islamic art and architecture, wait until you come to Shiraz; it will still wow you. If you look for it, you'll find beauty around every corner.

Perhaps the most iconic image from Shiraz is the rainbow glass found in the Nasir al-Mulk Mosque. Standing by its glorious stained windows, with the light shining through, is just like being inside a jewellery box. Built in the late 19th century by the decadent Qajar ruling dynasty, the decoration certainly befits its creators' lavish tastes.

Stroll down the road a little bit to get a glimpse of another gleaming treasure – the Shah Chéragh, a tomb of two important figures in Shia Islam. It's said the two brothers took refuge in the city during a persecution of Shias, and this funerary monument to them was built in the 12th century. Inside the blue dome, an emerald chamber filled with tiny mirrors glitters when it catches the light – and we promise it's one of the most jaw-dropping sights to be found in the entire Islamic world.

Shiraz is also the nearest major city to the ancient Persian site of Persepolis, built by Darius I and Xerxes the Great. Definitely one of the most impressive sights of the ancient empire, Persepolis gives you a taste of the might of the ancient Persian Empire, which once spanned from Greece to Pakistan.

In addition to its historic and religious sites, Shiraz was an artistic city, known for its poets and landscape artists. The Tomb of Hafez was built to commemorate one of Persia's most famous poets, and inside the garden and its wonderfully adorned pavilions, locals congregate to chat and watch the sun go down over their stunning city.

If you're looking for your own Garden of Eden, Shiraz may be the closest you ever get to it. Known as Iran's garden city, the streets wind their way around bountiful green spaces and parks. Built by the fabulously wealthy shahs and merchants, many of these slices of paradise surround the former summer houses of the rich and famous.

The Qavam House is a great example of this. In its luxurious and cool interior, you'll see rooms intricately tiled from floor to ceiling, decorative glass all around, and many comfortable chairs that are perfect for taking a break from the heat. Step outside into its Eram Garden, and dip your feet into the symmetrical fountains bubbling with turquoise water – it's hard to believe you're in Iran, isn't it?

75 LALIBELA

A burrowed religious site that stands proud below Ethiopia's holy town

To understand the significance of Ethiopia's Lalibela, you must first understand its history. In the 12th century, King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela set out to construct what he dubbed a 'new Jerusalem'. The decision came about after the Muslim conquests had halted Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Approximately 645 kilometres (400 miles) from Addis Ababa, 11 medieval monolithic churches were hewn from the living rock of monolithic block doors, windows, columns and floors. Roofs were also carefully chiselled out, forming this gigantic project, which was further completed with an extensive underground labyrinth of drainage ditches, trenches and ceremonial passages, including some that had openings to hermit caves and catacombs.

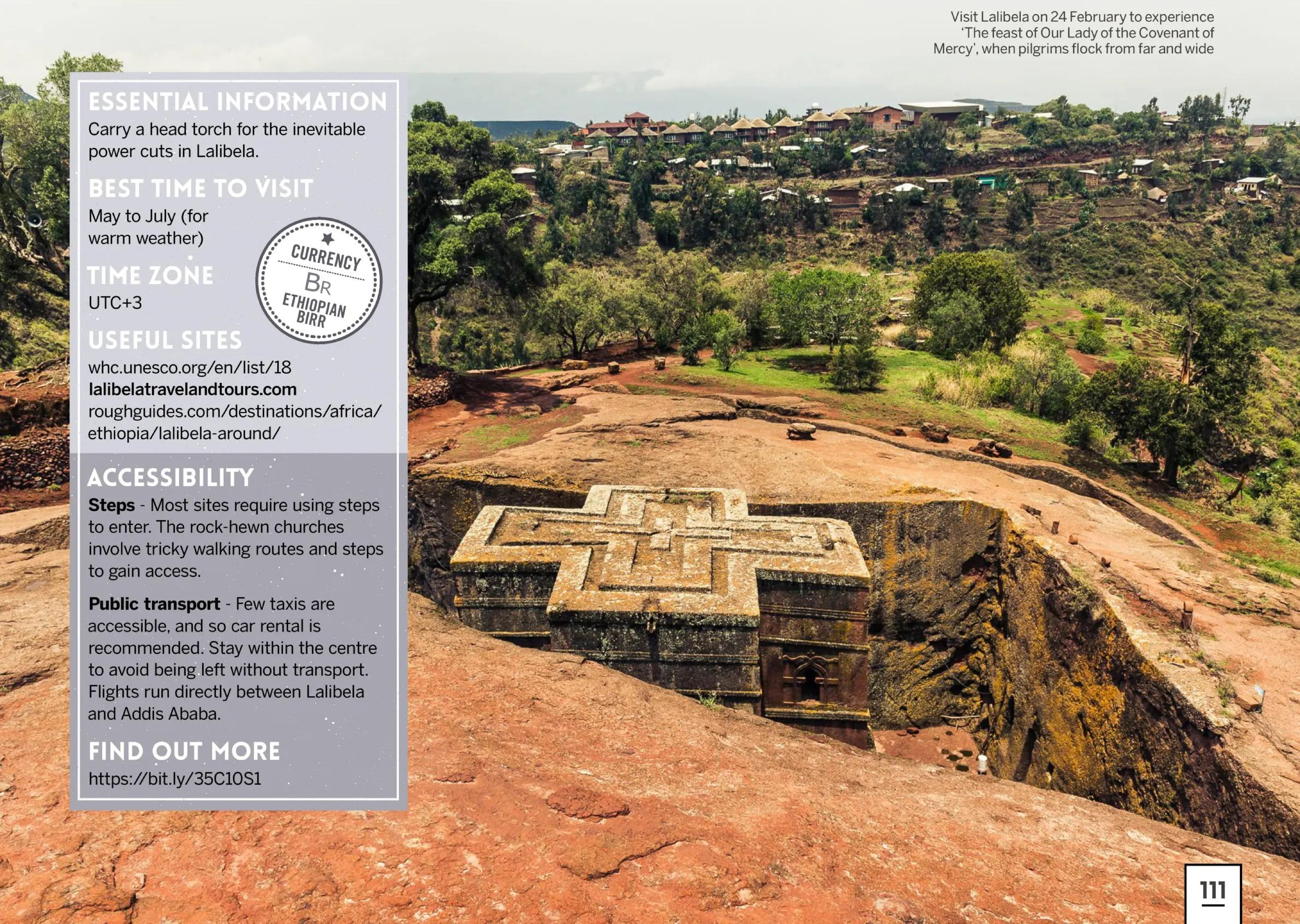
The churches were separated into two main groups: five of them were built on the north side of the river Jordan, while another six were constructed on the south side. The 11th church – Bete Giyorgis, or the Church of Saint George – is isolated from the others, but connected via a system of hand-carved trenches. Today, the site is jointly managed by state and Church, and even now it is home to a large community of priests and monks. Holy days of the Ethiopian Christian calendar attract thousands of pilgrims throughout the year.

Believed to predate Lalibela's 'new Jerusalem' by approximately 80 years, Yemrehanna Kristos, with its alternating wood and stone layers, is one of Ethiopia's best-preserved late-Aksumite buildings. Unlike Lalibela's holy maze, it was built, not burrowed, and most likely served as a blueprint for his structurally sound and beautifully detailed system. The whole building 'floats' on a foundation of olive wood panels, which keep it off the sodden ground.

If Lalibela is the crown of Ethiopian Christianity, the Bete Giyorgis is the central diamond of the district's religion, and a must-see on your visit. The building, which sits separate from the others, is a 15-metre-high (49-foot-high), three-tiered plinth in the shape of a Greek cross. It has been exceptionally preserved, and visitors can still admire the structural beauty of the building as though they had been born in the days of King Lalibela. The church's treasures are held in two 800-year-old, olive-wood boxes that are believed to have been carved by King Lalibela himself, and they're certainly not the only places you'll find interesting artefacts. Cavities in the walls surrounding the church are home to mummified corpses, along with a 16th-century canvas of Saint George slaying his dragon.

Sitting in a large courtyard containing three churches is the demure Bet Maryam. Dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the building is small but beautifully designed and decorated. This church boasts the reputation of being the most popular among pilgrims, and some believe that it might have been the first built in Lalibela. If size matters to you, then try Biete Medhane Alem, which is more like a vast Greek temple than a traditional Ethiopian church.

There are many wondrous sights to be found in Lalibela, but for a truly authentic experience, plan to visit on one of the many holy days to see the fascinating celebrations of Ethiopia's rich religious history.



Visit Lalibela on 24 February to experience 'The feast of Our Lady of the Covenant of Mercy', when pilgrims flock from far and wide

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Carry a head torch for the inevitable power cuts in Lalibela.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to July (for warm weather)

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

CURRENCY
Br
ETHIOPIAN BIRR

USEFUL SITES

whc.unesco.org/en/list/18
lalibelatravelandtours.com
roughguides.com/destinations/africa/ethiopia/lalibela-around/

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Most sites require using steps to enter. The rock-hewn churches involve tricky walking routes and steps to gain access.

Public transport - Few taxis are accessible, and so car rental is recommended. Stay within the centre to avoid being left without transport. Flights run directly between Lalibela and Addis Ababa.

FIND OUT MORE

https://bit.ly/35C10S1

76 PETRA

Featuring temples carved out of the cliff face, Petra is a step back in time

Of all of the ancient cities in the world, few surprise and enthral in quite the same way as beautiful Petra, situated on the slopes of the mountain Jebel al-Madhbah between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea in the Arab state of Jordan. It's a magical city of rose-coloured rock, with splendid gasp-inducing sights at every turn. But unlike many other monuments on a sightseeing wishlist, Petra amazes not only on the surface, but with the manner of its formation. There really is nowhere else like it on Earth.

Petra was first inhabited some 11,000 years ago, but its development proper began when a tribe of Arabian nomads called the Nabataeans settled there from the 5th century BCE. As they became rich off the trade routes that crossed their land – dealing in frankincense and myrrh from Yemen, Chinese silks, Indian spices and cotton – they created a majestic cosmopolitan city that was hallmarked by its beautiful buildings and gardens.

But while many have built impressive monuments over the centuries, none have done so quite like the Nabataeans. Take a journey down through the wide valley known as Bab as-Siq, and keep going through the winding, narrow, dim gorge that is the Siq – the main entrance to the city that runs for just under 1.5 kilometres (one mile) – and you will end up at Al-Khazeneh, also known as the Treasury. What you'll see will astound you, for the structure was elaborately carved into the sandstone in the 1st century BCE. It was quite obviously designed to impress, and that it does in spades. Its facade measures 39 by 30 metres (128 by 98 feet), decorated with incredible carvings that highlight Nabataean culture. There's a giant urn, and a central figure said to be a combination of the Egyptian and Greek goddesses Isis and Tyche respectively, flanked by Amazons. With two large eagles, two lions and six columns that end in floral capitals beneath the main pediment, it'll induce a sweat perhaps only matched by those who carved it.

Yet what is perhaps most surprising is that the Treasury is primarily for show: enter and you'll encounter a relatively small hall, since its purpose was actually as a royal tomb for the Nabataean king Aretas IV. Only when Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt rediscovered the ruins of Petra more than a millennium after it had been deserted following a devastating earthquake in 749 did it become known as the Treasury. That was in 1812 and the structure was believed to hold riches.

But just as the movie Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade was entirely incorrect to suggest the site was the resting place of the Holy Grail (its facade was made famous in the film), so too was the 19th-century hunch so very wrong. Indeed, the urn was peppered with gunshots when the nomadic Bedouins opened fire in the hope that treasure would eventually spill out. In fact, it is made from solid sandstone and yet the legend is every bit as exciting as any visit to Petra will undoubtedly be.

More carved tombs are found along the southern cliff face on what is known as the Street of Facades, proving that there is far more to Petra than its most famous sight. There are more than 40 of these tombs spread over a wide area just past the Treasury in the Outer Siq. Understood to have housed the bodies of important city officials, they are mixed with caves that may well have been used as temporary accommodation for those who were grieving or paying their respects.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

You'll need a single-entry visa to enter the country, valid for a month.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May, and September to November

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY
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JORDANIAN DINAR

USEFUL SITES

visitpetra.jo
google.com/maps/about/behind-the-scenes/streetview/treks/petra
international.visitjordan.com/Wheretogo/Petra.aspx

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - There are quite a few steps among the ruins, as well as sandy and rocky terrain. Golf carts, horse-drawn carriages and donkeys are on site, but be mindful of animal welfare.

Public transport - Buses to Petra town run frequently from the capital, Amman, and the resort of Aqaba.

FIND OUT MORE

accessiblejordan.com/en/posts/view?slug=Making-Petra-Accessible-for-All

You'll need to trek up 800 steps to reach the Monastery, but the effort is well worth it

The Urn Tomb is one of the best preserved tombs hewn into the sandstone cliff and dates back to about 70 CE

THE LEGEND IS EVERY BIT AS EXCITING AS ANY VISIT TO PETRA

A little further away is the open-air theatre, a Romanesque structure that was actually constructed by the Nabataeans before the Romans ever arrived in the city. While now badly deteriorated, it is mostly carved from solid rock, and it can hold a crowd of some 8,500 people, who would sit facing north and east in order to shield their eyes from the glare of the sun. The theatre would have played an important role in Nabataean life, and you can imagine it as an area bustling with life.

And yet death was never too far away, it seems: there are more Nabataean tombs dotted around, including the immense Palace Tomb with its huge facade, four burial chambers and five stories, as well as the Urn Tomb, which was likely built in 70 CE. The latter was adapted into a Byzantine church in 446 CE, centuries after the Romans – who adopted Christianity in 324 CE – took power in 106 CE. There really is a sense of evolving history in Petra.

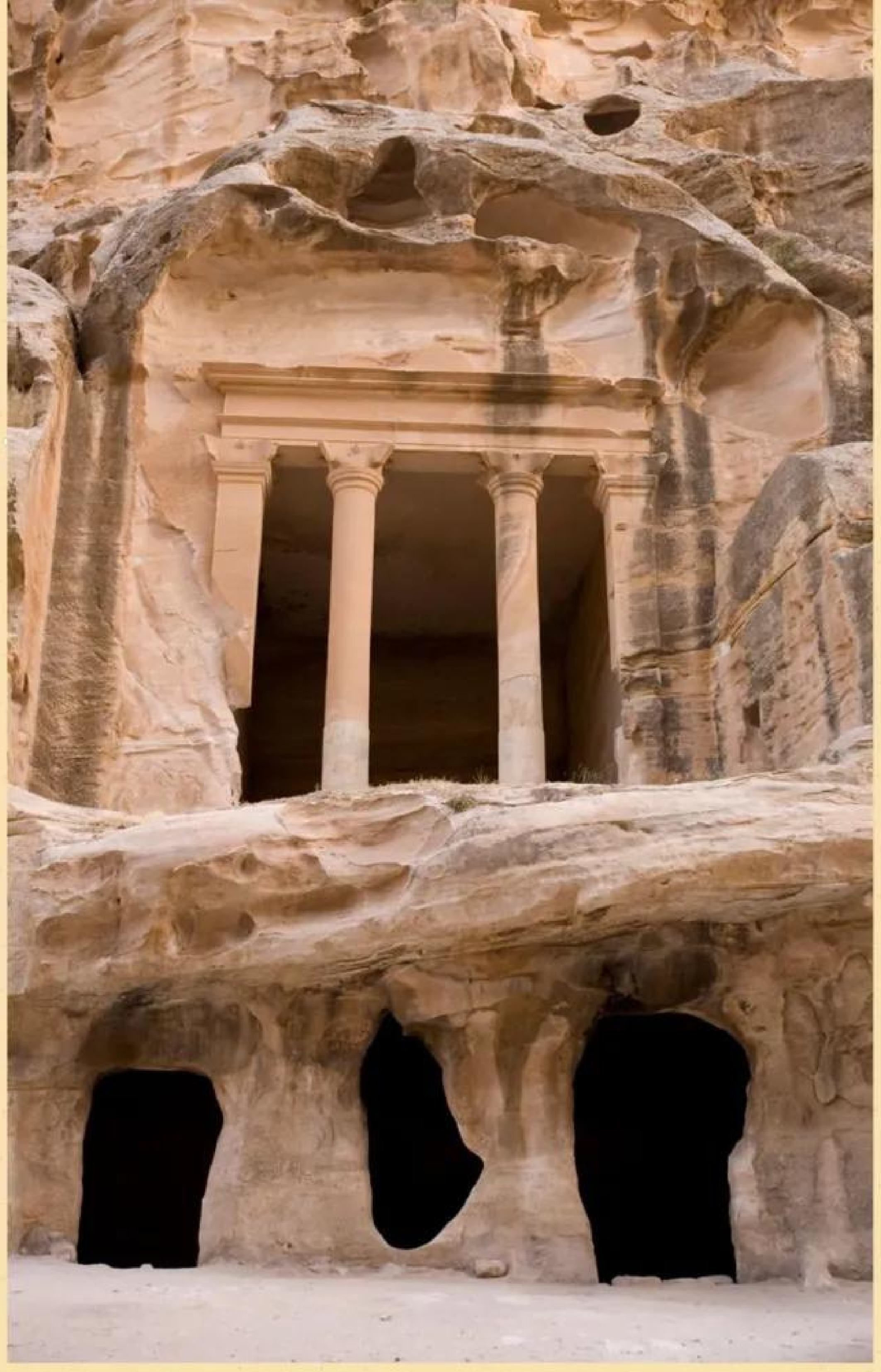
It's such a shame that so much has been damaged. A wander down the Colonnaded Street, for instance, is one of strict imagination since this principal shopping avenue – six metres (20 feet) wide – would once have been a hive of activity, particularly so at the market. The nearby Great Temple, too, now a major archaeological site, would have been a splendid sight when it was constructed, although much is left to inspire a sense of wonder. It is likely to have been a seat of government, and was adorned with beautiful art in keeping with the Nabataeans' love of sculpture and frescoes, seen in the use of elephant heads and well-carved pilasters.

Even further along is the Qasr Al-Bint temple, constructed in 30 BCE by the Nabataeans. Unusually for Petra, it is free-standing and reaches a height of 23 metres (75 feet) with marble staircases and ornate statues. It is one of Petra's best-preserved structures, a fascinating complex that continues to unearth gems thanks to ongoing excavations and restoration.

A trip to Petra is incomplete without a visit to Ad Deir, however. Known as the Monastery, it is 50 metres (164 feet) wide and 45 metres (148 feet) tall with a doorway opening to a majestic height of eight metres (26 feet). It is carved from the rock and served as a tomb of a Nabataean god-king. It is arguably even more impressive than the Treasury, which is quite some feat, but testament to the delights of this ancient caravan-city of Eastern traditions and Hellenistic architecture.

Just learning of the intricacies will astound: in 2016, the forgotten gardens of Petra were found once again, and showed a complex irrigation and water-storage system that not only allowed the gardens to flourish in the desert, but also fed fountains, a pond and a swimming pool up to 44 metres (144 feet) in length. Far from being a dry land, it even appears there were trees. Who know what else lies beneath the sands? Petra really is a city of discovery.

The Romans refurbished the theatre after 106 CE, but the structure itself was created by the Nabataeans

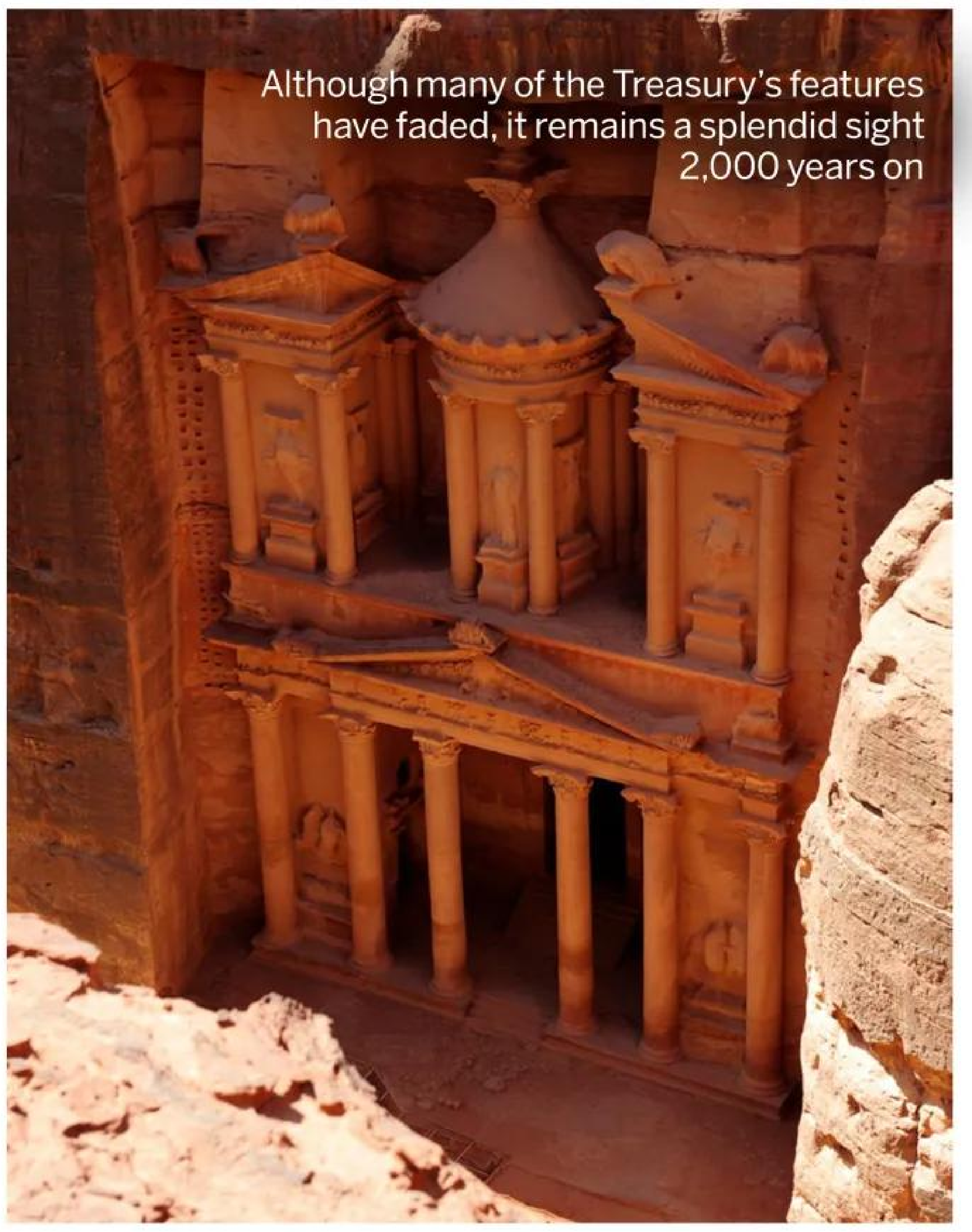


LITTLE PETRA

Travel away from Petra itself and you will come across Little Petra, or Siq al-Barid. It's a smaller and much quieter site but, like Petra itself, it has buildings carved into the sandstone and a wonderful sense of history.

The most likely explanation for its existence is that it was a place of rest for the caravans that headed to Petra from around the Middle East and the Mediterranean. As such, it had tombs, water channels and accommodation, and it is a chance to glimpse the real Jordan, some three miles off the more-beaten track.

In 2010, ancient Hellenistic-style wall paintings, once covered with centuries of grime, were finally revealed in Little Petra. Discovered in a dining area, principal chamber and recess, they show flowers, insects, people and birds, adding to the huge number of astounding tourist attractions in the area. Should you visit Petra, you must add them to your itinerary.



Although many of the Treasury's features have faded, it remains a splendid sight 2,000 years on

77 SERENGETI NATIONAL PARK

For some of the best wildlife on the planet, look no further than Tanzania

Thundering across the plains of Serengeti in Tanzania in the east of Africa, some 1.5 million wildebeest make a 1,931-kilometre (1,200-mile) journey towards the green pastures of the Maasai Mara Game Reserve in neighbouring Kenya. It is the largest movement of animals in the world, and the wildebeest are not alone; they are joined by thousands upon thousands of zebra and Thomson's gazelle. As such, it's a truly amazing, jaw-dropping wildlife show and definitely one of life's natural wonders.

Serengeti National Park is an impressive wildlife sanctuary, established in 1951 and designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site 30 years later. An area of outstanding beauty, it has attracted controversy over the years – not least for the British-led decision to move most of the indigenous Maasai people from the land – but the motivation was to preserve the wildlife, and it thrives in abundance. Here you can see the densest lion population on Earth, and view African leopards, African bush elephants, eastern black rhinoceros and African buffalo.

Indeed, the wealth of wildlife is overwhelming, with 4,000 spotted hyena, golden wolves, mongooses, otters, cheetahs, Maasai giraffes, warthogs, hippos, species of antelope, more than 500 species of bird, reptiles from the Nile crocodile to the leopard tortoise to chameleons, black mambas and puff adders. That's only brushing the surface, too. A trip to Serengeti National Park is like a who's who of iconic animals, which conservationists constantly work hard to protect and help thrive.

Paying a visit to the National Park is therefore of benefit financially for those seeking to prevent poaching, making your time in Tanzania a most noble trip. The National Park is split into three sections, with the endless plains of the 'serengit' in the south and centre the most popular, because they are where you'll view the majority of the amazing wildlife. You'd see less in the north, at the point where it merges with the Maasai Mara Reserve, but a trip to the western corridor is worth it for the forest and the animals around the Grumeti River. Everything you've dreamed an Africa safari to be is found here, and there's an abundance of trips you can take, from the traditional game drives during the day to the magical night tours, walking trips and ventures that can take you up high for views from a plane.

At 14,750 square kilometres (5,695 square miles), don't expect to cover the entire park. Pick your interest and you'll be able to hit the long, rough roads for the ride of your life. There are wonderful stops, including the Serengeti Visitor's Centre where you can refresh and catch a glimpse of passing wildlife, and some Maasai villages whose populations will be more than willing to teach you their culture and traditions. Maybe even engage in a dance as you learn of a different way of life, but be careful to respect the tribal rituals and lifestyle.

One highlight is the Moru Kopjes, home to the rare black rhino and the Serengeti Rhino Project. The scenic rock formations in this area are themselves a phenomenal sight, tinted red due to the oxidation of the iron they contain, and a point at which animals and plants thrive, safe from the harsh weather of the plains.

In Olduvai Gorge, you can see where the first human species is understood to have resided, and the complexities of humanity can be perceived (mainly in the stone tools that have been uncovered there). However, it's the thundering wildebeest that will always prove the largest draw. In the Serengeti, you are free to roam the finest East African plains in existence – and you'll never return home disappointed.

Giraffes walk the land at Serengeti National Park, Tanzania

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

It's best to go with a reputable safari tour operator, since they best understand the land.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to March (in the southern plains)

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

CURRENCY
TSh
TANZANIAN SHILLING

USEFUL SITES

serengeti.com
porini.com
serengetiparktanzania.com

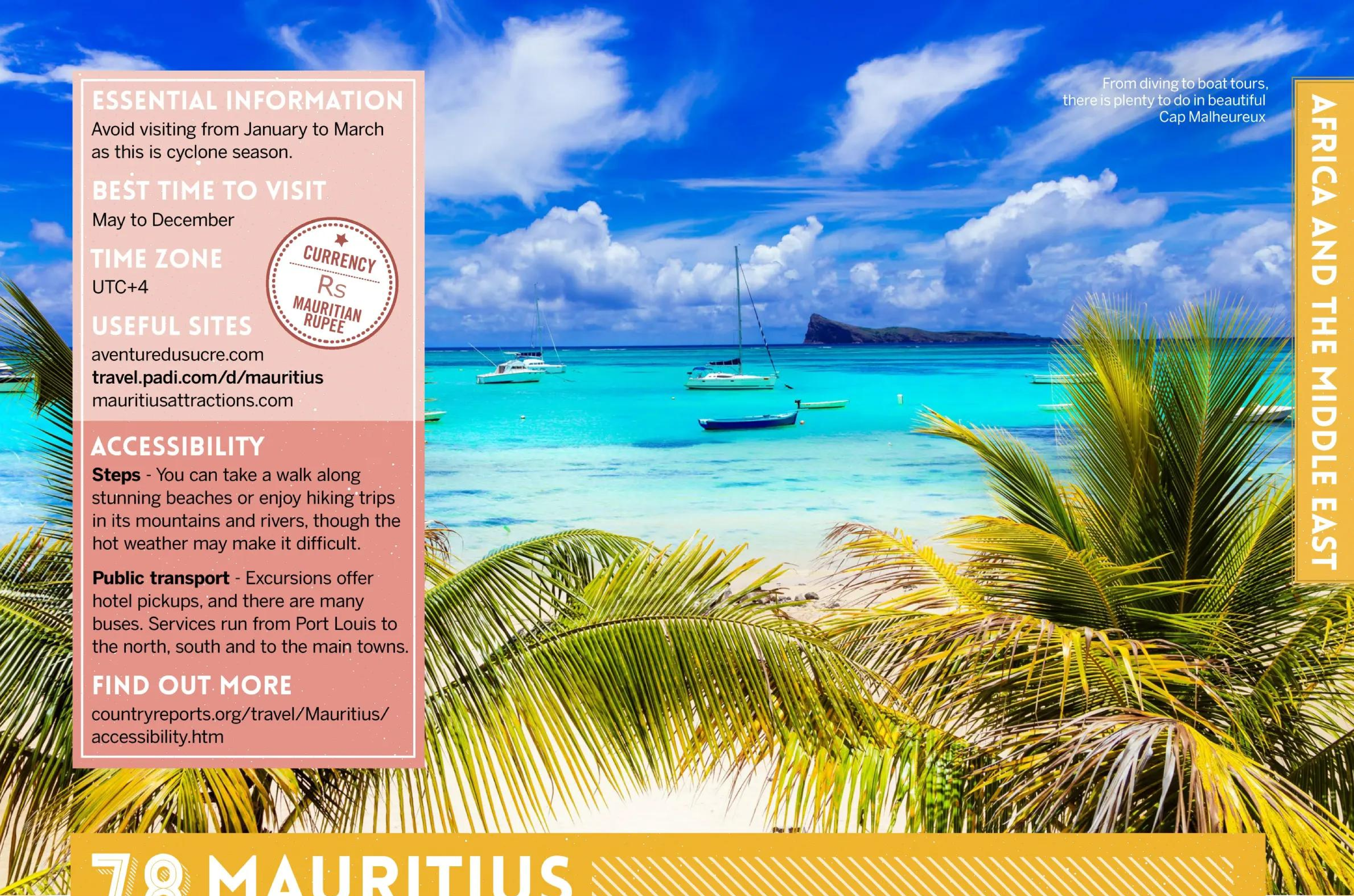
ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Organising a safari is a personal experience, so any walking distances can be considered.

Public transport - Most Serengeti safaris start in Arusha, which is also a major transport hub. There are 'dala dala' minibuses available to transport you around Arusha.

FIND OUT MORE

africaodyssey.com/blog/african-safari-holidays-for-elderly-people



From diving to boat tours, there is plenty to do in beautiful Cap Malheureux

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Avoid visiting from January to March as this is cyclone season.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

May to December

TIME ZONE

UTC+4

CURRENCY
Rs
MAURITIAN RUPEE

USEFUL SITES

aventuredusucre.com
travel.padi.com/d/mauritius
mauritiusattractions.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - You can take a walk along stunning beaches or enjoy hiking trips in its mountains and rivers, though the hot weather may make it difficult.

Public transport - Excursions offer hotel pickups, and there are many buses. Services run from Port Louis to the north, south and to the main towns.

FIND OUT MORE

countryreports.org/travel/Mauritius/accessibility.htm

78 MAURITIUS

Known as the Pearl of the Indian Ocean, Mauritius lives up to its name

Think Mauritius is just pristine white beaches, crystal-clear sea and palm trees? Think again. The heavenly island in the Indian Ocean is much more than just sparkling turquoise water and unspoilt sands. Whether you want to enjoy nature or culture, adventure or relaxation, this tropical paradise has something for everyone.

Mauritius has the perfect climate for a sunny holiday, with temperatures of 17 to 30 degrees Celsius (63 to 86 degrees Fahrenheit) year-round, and more than 100 beaches.

For the active traveller, there's plenty to keep you busy, from paddleboarding to kitesurfing. Mauritius is also world-renowned for big game fishing. Back on dry land, Domaine d'Etoile is ideal for adventurers, offering quad biking, horse riding and ziplining. And for sport fans, the Gymkhana Golf Club is believed to be the world's fourth-oldest golf course.

Mauritius is a nature lover's dream, from its mountains and forests to waterfalls and coral reefs. The spectacular Le Morne Brabant is a 556-metre (1,820-foot) high mountain and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which, when viewed from above, gives the illusion of an 'underwater waterfall'. The Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Botanical Gardens, famous for its giant water lilies, is one of the best botanical gardens in the world. Hikers should head to the Black River Gorges National Park for lush jungle, or Tamarind Falls for captivating cascades. If you love waterfalls, Chamarel and Rochester Falls are also worth a visit if you get the chance. Another natural wonder is the Terres des Sept Couleurs, stunning sand dunes made up of seven different colours.

Mauritius is a natural paradise, and a haven for wildlife too. The island is surrounded by coral reefs and marine life. There are around 50 dive sites (Rempart Serpent and La Cathédrale are two of the best) and around 4,000 fish species. If you're not a qualified scuba diver, you can go snorkelling or board a glass-bottomed boat to enjoy this real-life aquarium. Above water you can go dolphin or whale watching at Tamarin Bay or visit Ile Aux Aigrettes to see giant tortoises and pink pigeons.

For such a small island, Mauritius is surprisingly multicultural, with a mix of Indian, African, French and Chinese influences, which can be seen in its music, traditions and food. Dance the traditional sega or visit one of the country's many festivals to take in the culture. The Maha Shivaratri Festival, during which Hindus bathe in the Grand Bassin lake to bring good fortune, is the biggest pilgrimage outside of India. The country's culture can also be seen in its architecture. Visit the vibrant city of Port Louis to discover French colonial style, or take a tour of Eureka House, an authentic 1830s creole estate. Also worth a visit is the Champ de Mars racecourse where Mauritian independence was proclaimed, and Cap Malheureux where the British defeated the French in 1810.

Mauritius's history is deeply rooted in the sugar-cane industry. Visit L'Aventure de Sucre or stop off at Chamarel Rhumerie for a tour of how rum – a byproduct of sugar – is made.

Mauritian cuisine is a combination of cultures and flavours. From local seafood and spicy Indian curries to sweet French pastries, foodies will love experimenting. Don't forget to try the delicious dholl puri, a flatbread stuffed with yellow split peas – the tasty street snack is Mauritius's national dish.

The list of things to do in Mauritius is endless. If you enjoy shopping, Grand Baie Fish Market and Port Louis Market should be on your itinerary. It's the perfect destination for honeymooners with a whole host of luxury resorts, including the unforgettable Bubble Lodge at Bois Cheri. The country may be known for its five-star accommodation and casinos but you can plan a budget holiday here, too.

The world really is your oyster, so get booking to go and see this dazzling pearl.

79 THE GREAT PYRAMIDS

Visit Egypt's marvellous display of Pharaonic wealth and power

Across the globe, seven locations are home to a special group of classical monuments celebrated for their structural magnificence and historical importance: the Colossus of Rhodes, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Lighthouse of Alexandria, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, Olympia's Statue of Zeus, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, and the Great Pyramids of Giza all make up the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. While all were impressive in their heyday, only one remains largely intact. That specific champion of the ancient world is also the oldest of all its siblings, making it an impressive and intriguing display of royal appreciation that stands proudly on a plateau on the southwestern outskirts of Egypt's famous capital of Cairo. Welcome to the Great Giza Pyramid Complex.

Three limestone pyramids make up the fascinating wonder: Khufu's pyramid (otherwise known as the Pyramid of Khufu and Pyramid of Cheops), the pyramid of Khafre, and the pyramid of Menkaure. Adjacent to this structure, the Sphinx monument is dedicated to an unknown Egyptian royal. Khufu's pyramid is the oldest and largest of the three in the Giza Necropolis at 138.8 metres (455 feet) in height, and it has been estimated by experts to have taken 20 years to construct, ceasing in 2560 BCE. The structure is believed to have been ordered by the second ruler of the Fourth Dynasty, Pharaoh Khufu, who ruled between 2609 and 2584 BCE.

The pyramid was built with such sophistication that for thousands of years it was believed to have been built by aliens, although now it seems more probable that Khufu's vizier, Hemon, or Hemiunu, was the architect. Creator aside, many still debate the techniques used in its construction, as experts estimate that 800 limestone blocks would have had to have been hoisted per day in the blazing sun. It is a true example of architectural genius, and for almost 4,000 years, the Great Pyramid was the tallest man-made structure in the world until the creation of cathedrals and skyscrapers domineered the skies. Although the Great Pyramid was originally covered by casing stones that formed a smooth outer surface, what is seen today is the underlying core structure.

The second tallest pyramid in the complex is the pyramid of Khafre at 136.4 metres (447.5 feet) tall. This is the tomb of the Fourth-Dynasty pharaoh Khafre, Khufu's son, who ruled during the 'golden age' of the Old Kingdom of Egypt from 2520 to 2494 BCE. The last of the three structures belongs to Menkaure, Khafre's

IT IS A TRUE EXAMPLE OF ARCHITECTURAL GENIUS

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Vendors are reportedly fairly aggressive and desperate for customers.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September to April (for more withstandable temperatures)

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY
E£
EGYPTIAN POUND

USEFUL SITES

egypt.travel/en/attractions/giza-plateau
kayak.co.uk/Giza.25999.guide
tourist-destinations.net/2013/10/giza-egypt.html

ACCESSIBILITY

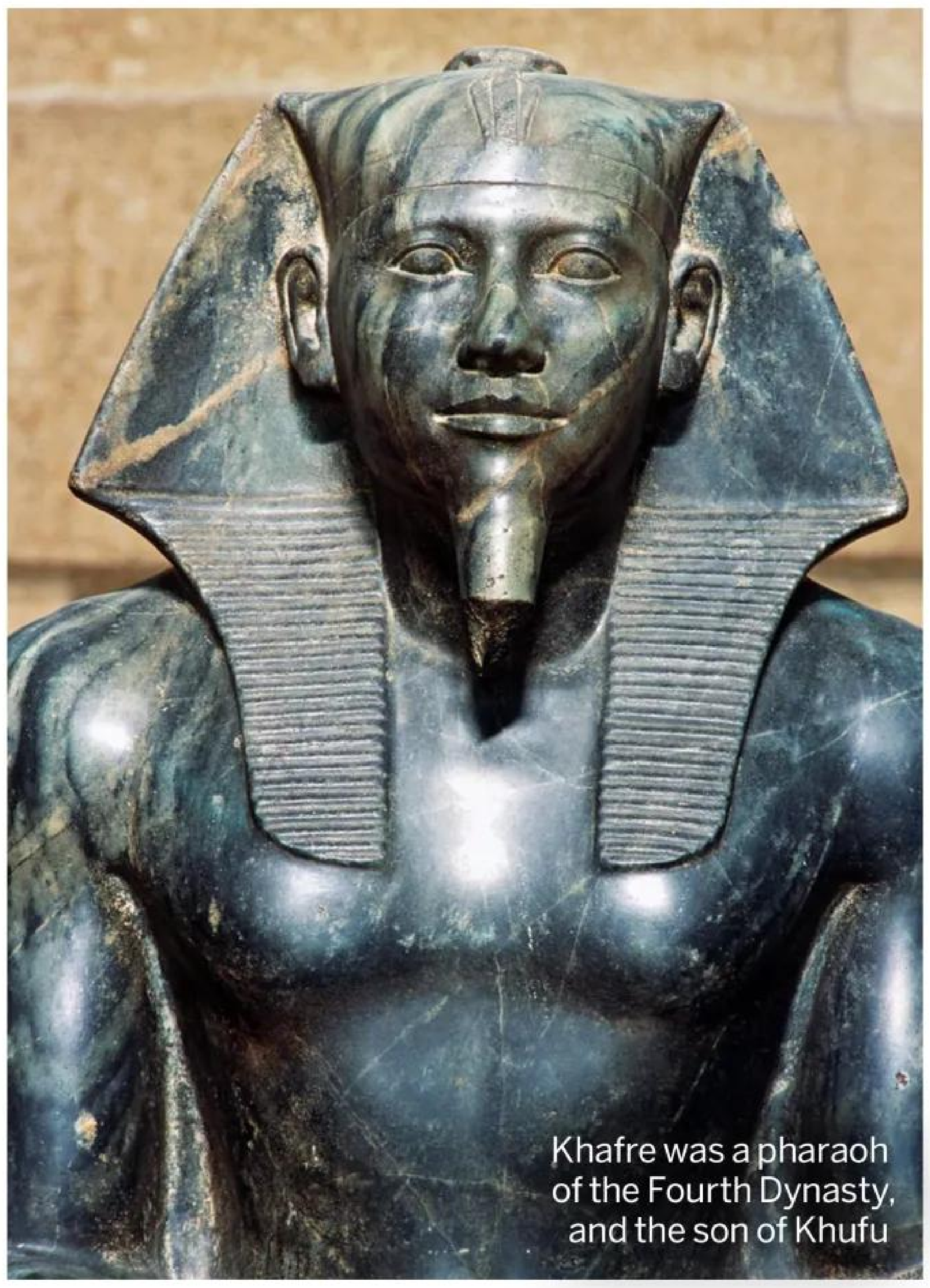
Steps - The pyramid complex is large, and there is uphill walking involved, but camel or horse tours are available. The corridors and stairs within the pyramids are narrow and worn.

Public transport - You can reach Giza by metro, and then catch a shuttle from the station that takes you to the pyramid complex. There are also plenty of taxis and tours to take you there.

FIND OUT MORE

wheelchairtravel.org/giza-pyramids-wheelchair-egypt/

The Great Giza Complex is made up of three pyramids of varying sizes, dedicated to the great pharaohs of Egypt



Khafre was a pharaoh of the Fourth Dynasty, and the son of Khufu

son and Kufu's grandson, and it was the last of the pyramids to be built in the Great Giza complex for the pharaohs who ruled between 2575 and 2465 BCE. For thousands of years, these pyramids have been the subject of much speculation and investigation, having captivated the intellectual minds of curious people for centuries. To travel to the necropolis is an experience many dream of doing, and it's easy to understand why.

The city of Giza is about 16 kilometres (ten miles) west of Cairo, Egypt's capital, and it's on the west bank of the River Nile. In order to fully experience the awe and wonder of the pyramids, try to spend a night in a nearby hotel where the structure is visible from your room so that you can wake up with the pyramids greeting you first thing in the morning. Before you set out, you'll also need to consider what you're going to wear. Egypt is a Muslim country, and while shorts and a T-shirt are generally fine, remember to be respectful. You'll also need to make sure you adopt appropriate footwear, as much of the experience requires you to be on your feet.

Staying close by serves two purposes, as it is less hassle to walk to the pyramids than to drive or get a taxi. Having the pyramids within walking distance means that you can travel on foot and be in charge of your own experience. If taking a taxi, beware as taxi drivers have been known to overcharge visitors for fares to the site. If you do decide to get a taxi to the pyramids, agree a price with your driver before you set off, or consider using Uber. If you are staying in Cairo then the journey is approximately an hour by taxi. You can also catch a bus from the capital.

It is advised that you travel as part of a group, particularly if it is your first time in the area. Before you even reach the vicinity of the pyramids, vendors offering horse and camel rides to the entrance eagerly await your custom. The pyramids of Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure are situated in the shade-free dessert, so saving your energy and travelling on horseback may be a smart idea, but don't be pressured into it by the vendors if you would prefer to walk or be driven. At the site, there will be a lot of people trying to sell souvenirs – don't be alarmed at their pushy natures. If you're not interested in something they are selling, politely decline them with a smile and move on. If you do fancy their wares, try and haggle for a bargain

Using a paid guide on your tour will ensure that your experience of the pyramids will be a good one. Only a true Egyptologist will be able to bring the story of the Egyptian kings and queens to life through their experienced knowledge of the site, so they are worth investing in. Despite the age of the pyramids, the pharaohs' tombs are still in remarkable condition and, unlike many other historic monuments sealed off with red tape and 'keep out' signs, the narrow corridors, chambers and galleries are still largely open to the public for exploration. However, anything of any value has been removed and can usually be found in the national museums.

The rules of what you can and can't do in and around the pyramids tend to vary depending on the type of tourist you are and the type of patrolmen around at the time, but it is best to be respectful and up-front about your intentions and what you would like to get out of your visit, be it a picture of the tombs or a glance inside the tomb itself. Legally, you are not allowed to climb the pyramids – a German teacher disregarded the strict laws in 2016 and scaled the monument, promptly receiving a lifetime ban from visiting the site. But don't let that put you off – go and soak up the experience of the pyramids, and the sun while you're at it. It's the historical holiday of a lifetime.

THE GREAT SPHINX

Crafted from limestone with the body of a lion and the head of a human, the Sphinx structure outside of the necropolis is an amazing addition to the Great Giza complex. Lying from west to east, it is thought that the structure, which stands at approximately 20 metres (66 feet) tall, was built as early as 2500 BCE. However, unlike the pyramids themselves, not very much is known about the colossal royal monument. As a result of this lack of knowledge about it, it is not only the largest monolithic statue and the oldest known monumental structure, but it is also attached to some of the biggest mysteries in Egyptian history. When was it actually built? Who built it? Why did they build it? Who broke the nose? Who is the monument dedicated to? While some believe it was dedicated to a pharaoh, there is no strict evidence that provides us with a solid answer.

Inside the Giza Pyramids, you will discover ancient hieroglyphs inside tombs

80 ZANZIBAR

This eclectic paradise, a region of Tanzania, is simply unlike anywhere else

Known as Spice Island, the honeymoon destination of Zanzibar may be famous for its turquoise waters and pristine white beaches, but this multicultural melting pot has plenty to spice up your life.

The archipelago in the Indian Ocean, just off the coast of Tanzania, comprises over 50 islands, but the main ones are Unguja and Pemba. Unguja, commonly known as Zanzibar, is the largest and is popular with tourists for its stunning beaches and capital city Stone Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the birthplace of Freddie Mercury. The 'Green Island' is a fitting name for Pemba, which is covered in lush-green forest and clove plantations – 70 per cent of the world's cloves are produced here. Zanzibar's second-largest island is also one of the best spots for diving and snorkelling. It may have less hotels than Unguja, but one resort that gets a lot of attention is the Manta Resort, which boasts an underwater room offshore.

The smaller islands also have their draws. Chumbe, Zanzibar's first Marine Protected Area, is a wildlife haven; watch humpback whales during migration, search for endangered coconut crabs or the rare Aders's duiker. The Chumbe Island Eco Lodge is the island's only accommodation. There are just seven bungalows, so you have total privacy.

There are only ten rooms on the remote and luxurious Mnemba Atoll as it's just 500 metres (1,640 feet) in diameter, but you'll have to splash out to stay here. The reefs in this marine conservation area are stunning and you can see turtles during breeding season.

If you're searching for paradise, the best beaches on the main island are Nungwi and Kendwa in the north, Matemwe in the northeast and Bwejuu in the southeast. While Pemba and Mnemba are the best locations for diving and snorkelling, there are plenty of spots off the main island including Kizimkazi reef and Stone Town reef. If you don't dive, there are plenty of water sports you can still enjoy, from kitesurfing to deep-sea fishing.

Its waters may be rich in marine life, but there's plenty more to see. Visit the Jozani Forest to see red colobus monkeys, one of Africa's rarest primates, or go to see Aldabra giant tortoises on Prison Island.

The archipelago's real charm lies in its rich culture. Once a major trade route, Zanzibar represents a mix of cultures from Africa, the Middle East, India, Persia and Europe, and these influences can be seen in its food, architecture and customs. Visit Lukmaan restaurant to try local curry and samosas, or go to the Forodhani Gardens for fresh seafood and sugar cane juice. The Rock restaurant's unique offshore location makes it a diner's dream.

Stone Town's architecture highlights the blend of cultures, from Anglican churches to Islamic mosques and Hindu temples. Look out for the incredible woodwork on the doors, showing off detailed workmanship.

Zanzibar has a number of festivals throughout the year, but highlights include the Sauti za Busara music festival and the Zanzibar International Film Festival.

Whether you're taking a dhow (traditional sailing boat) to experience the breathtaking sunsets, or shopping for a kitenge (Swahili garment) at the Darajani Market, there's culture around every corner. The history of Zanzibar is equally as fascinating, from spices to slavery. Visit the slave monument, the former slave market or David Livingstone's house to learn about Zanzibar's history as East Africa's biggest slave port. Explore a plantation to discover how the country's wealth grew from common spices like cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg.

Take a tour of Stone Town, from the House of Wonders to the Old Fort and Palace Museum. Other landmarks include the Old Dispensary, the Persian Baths and, of course, Freddie Mercury's childhood home.

You may go for the beaches, but Zanzibar's unique mix of gems is what will really rock you.

The Jozani Forest is home to one of Africa's rarest primates, the red colobus monkey

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If you want to take photographs of locals in Zanzibar, be sure to ask for permission beforehand.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

December to February or June to October (dry season)

TIME ZONE

UTC+3

CURRENCY
TSh
TANZANIAN SHILLING

USEFUL SITES

safariblue.net
scubafishzanzibar.com
andbeyond.com/destinations/africa/tanzania

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Set on the coast of Tanzania, the elevation in Zanzibar is low. Walking along its beaches or through the town won't be too strenuous.

Public transport - Buses, or 'dala dala', to destinations such as Nungwi, Kendwa, Matemwe and Kiwengwa leave near Darajani Market.

FIND OUT MORE

tanzaniaodyssey.com/blog/tanzania-holidays-elderly-senior-citizens/

81 DUBAI

Technology and tradition converge in this dreamy desert metropolis

Gazing out over Dubai's skyline, an eclectic array of megalithic skyscrapers jutting through the clouds, it is hard to imagine this megacity began as a sleepy fishing village. To most visitors, the city is a land of awe and opulence, a shopper's paradise and a spectacle that must be seen to be believed.

One of seven emirates, or states, that comprises the United Arab Emirates, Dubai straddles the coast of the Arabian Gulf, with swathes of meticulously designed luxury hotels and resorts on hand to cater to every whim and desire. You are only ever a stone's throw away from architectural marvels – from the world's tallest building, Burj Khalifa, to the vast Dubai Mall at its feet, home to more than 1,500 shops and restaurants.

However, beyond the expected glitz and glamour lies an even more enthralling world of adventure for those who seek it. Inland, the desert stretches out, an ocean of sand, dotted with scant bursts of bushes and trees. Dubai's wandering Bedouin nomads once called this land home, carrying on thousands of years of tradition in the forms of poetry, falconry and the ancient art of Arabian hospitality.

Though the desert is rich in oryx, desert foxes, snakes and mice, to the ancient Emirati, the faithful peregrine falcon has always been man's best friend – a relationship that endures to this day, as modern hunters train their birds of prey with drones.

Despite the encroachment of modernity, coffee remains as it always has been: a ritualistic act, steeped in tradition. Historically, deals were made and alliances forged over steaming cups in the majlis, a space used to socialise. Modern visitors can enjoy this experience in the open desert, underneath the twinkling stars.

More adventurous types can venture into the wadis, or valleys, of the Al-Hajar Mountains – the highest in the Arabian Peninsula. Set against this dramatic backdrop is the oasis town of Hatta, home to historic forts, watchtowers and traditional irrigation systems.

Though rainfall is sparse in the region, it collects in the neighbouring gullies, aided by local dams, which make the perfect place for some mountaineering, biking or even just a spot of camping, amid the patter of leaping goat hooves, with food on an open fire.

Back in the city, the Old Town sits along the Creek, often seen to delineate 'old' and 'new' Dubai. Ironically, Al-Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood is on the 'new' side, a labyrinthine network of homes. Traditionally, houses were built of coral and limestone, held together with a mortar of seashells and lime. These featured wind towers and courtyards, to aid air circulation. Today, they host a variety of shops, art galleries and cafés, a quiet contrast to bustling Deira on the other side of the Creek. Here, wooden dhows stock up on electronics, car parts and other goods, to ship to India and Africa, bringing back food and livestock.

Contrary to popular belief, Dubai is a land of bold contrasts, where loud and quiet meet sand, stone and sea, and where people converge from all over the world. The result is a delicate harmony of mesmerising peaks and enchanting troughs well worth visiting.

Dubai's skyline displays an eclectic array of megalithic skyscrapers

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Be sure to look into the local customs; though it can be progressive, the UAE is still a fairly traditional country.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Between November and March, to avoid the sweltering heat

TIME ZONE

UTC+4

CURRENCY
د.إ
UAE DIRHAM

USEFUL SITES

visitdubai.com
platinum-heritage.com
arabian-adventures.com

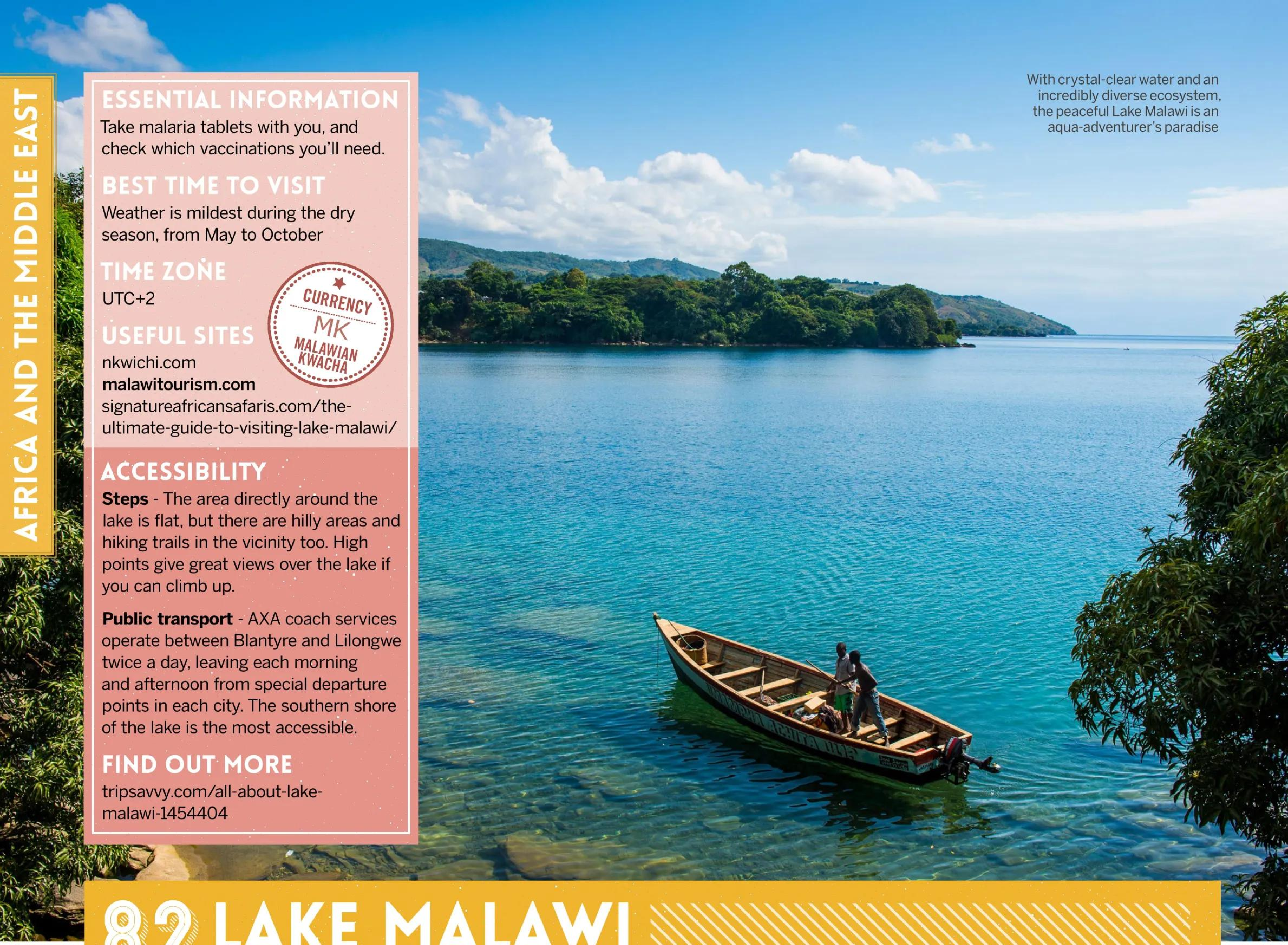
ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Dubai is a tale of two cities. The modern downtown area ticks all the accessibility boxes. The older Deira Creek district is a different story, with a distinct lack of curb cuts, for example.

Public transport - A paragon of accessible infrastructure that the rest of the world could learn from, the UAE's biggest city boasts a driverless metro and disability-friendly trams.

FIND OUT MORE

wheelchairtravel.org/dubai/



With crystal-clear water and an incredibly diverse ecosystem, the peaceful Lake Malawi is an aqua-adventurer's paradise

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Take malaria tablets with you, and check which vaccinations you'll need.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Weather is mildest during the dry season, from May to October

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY

MK
MALAWIAN KWACHA

USEFUL SITES

nkwichi.com
malawitourism.com
signatureafricansafaris.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-visiting-lake-malawi/

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The area directly around the lake is flat, but there are hilly areas and hiking trails in the vicinity too. High points give great views over the lake if you can climb up.

Public transport - AXA coach services operate between Blantyre and Lilongwe twice a day, leaving each morning and afternoon from special departure points in each city. The southern shore of the lake is the most accessible.

FIND OUT MORE

tripsavvy.com/all-about-lake-malawi-1454404

82 LAKE MALAWI

Blue waters, gorgeous scenery and wildlife make this an idyllic location

Gazing out over the open, turquoise expanse of Lake Malawi, you could easily be forgiven for mistaking it for the sea. At 587 kilometres (365 miles) long and 83 kilometres (52 miles) wide, it is colossal – more than three times larger than the vast Lake Titicaca in South America. In the north, it reaches depths of 700 metres. Beneath the sparkling waters, hundreds of endemic species of fish jostle to and fro, while on the surface, rich islands teem with life.

Straddling the borders of Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania, the East African lake's combination of overflowing greenery, mountains and calm waters make this a veritable paradise. Idyllic fishing villages are scattered along the shoreline, amidst untouched stretches of sandy beach.

From Mangochi to Monkey Bay, and Nkhotakota to the historic sugar town of Dwangwa, the lake boasts a vast array of lodges, hotels and resorts. With the region home to baboons, leopards, warthogs and hundreds of species of bird, it makes for some exciting river safaris in Liwonde National Park or the Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve – as long as caution is paid to the occasionally terrifying hippos and Nile crocodiles.

Occupying tamer ground, tucked away on the Mozambique side of the lake, is Nkwichi Lodge, named after the squeaks of feet along the wet beach. Part of the Manda Wilderness Project, dedicated to developing eco-tourism in Mozambique, it aims to minimise its environmental impact, while training and hiring local staff.

More akin to a tropical desert island, the lake's shores make for spectacular coastal walks among the monkeys and foliage, towards stunning viewpoints. Most lodges provide all manner of exhilarating recreations; from quad biking, birdwatching and volleyball to jet skiing, sailing, windsurfing and water-skiing out on the open water.

However, it is underwater where the lake shows its true colours. Aside from occasional gusts of wind, Lake Malawi is mostly calm and crystal-clear, with incredible visibility up to 30 metres (98 feet). The plethora of bright and bizarre creatures are great for prime scuba diving or snorkelling. There are more than 1,000 species of fish living in these waters – more than North America and Europe combined. Don't worry if you don't know how to scuba – Malawi is one of the cheapest places in the world to learn how to scuba dive.

Likoma Island, on the eastern side of the lake, has been particularly well-preserved, with an abundant population of bloated, quirky baobab trees. Home to St Peter's Cathedral, the third-largest in Africa, the island can be reached either by a remarkable flight from Lilongwe or the MV Ilala – a 620-tonne ship that has sailed the entire length of the lake for almost 70 years. Kaya Mawa, nestled atop the coastal rocks, is a favourite escape, ripe for exploring.

Fed by 14 rivers, the lake is also home to a gathering unlike any other. It begins with an explosion in the horizon; smoke bursting from the lake. However, this is no fire, but the mass mating of the nkungo lake fly – the largest congregation of any species in the world, and a rowdy one at that. Unfortunate specimens, blown off course, may find themselves ending up in one of the local delicacies: fly burgers.

83 THE KALAHARI

Explore a barren desert in one of the largest nature reserves on Earth

Stretching on for miles across southern Africa and home to the indigenous San people, a variety of wildlife and flora and striking salt pans, the Kalahari is a once-in-a-lifetime destination and a wonder to behold.

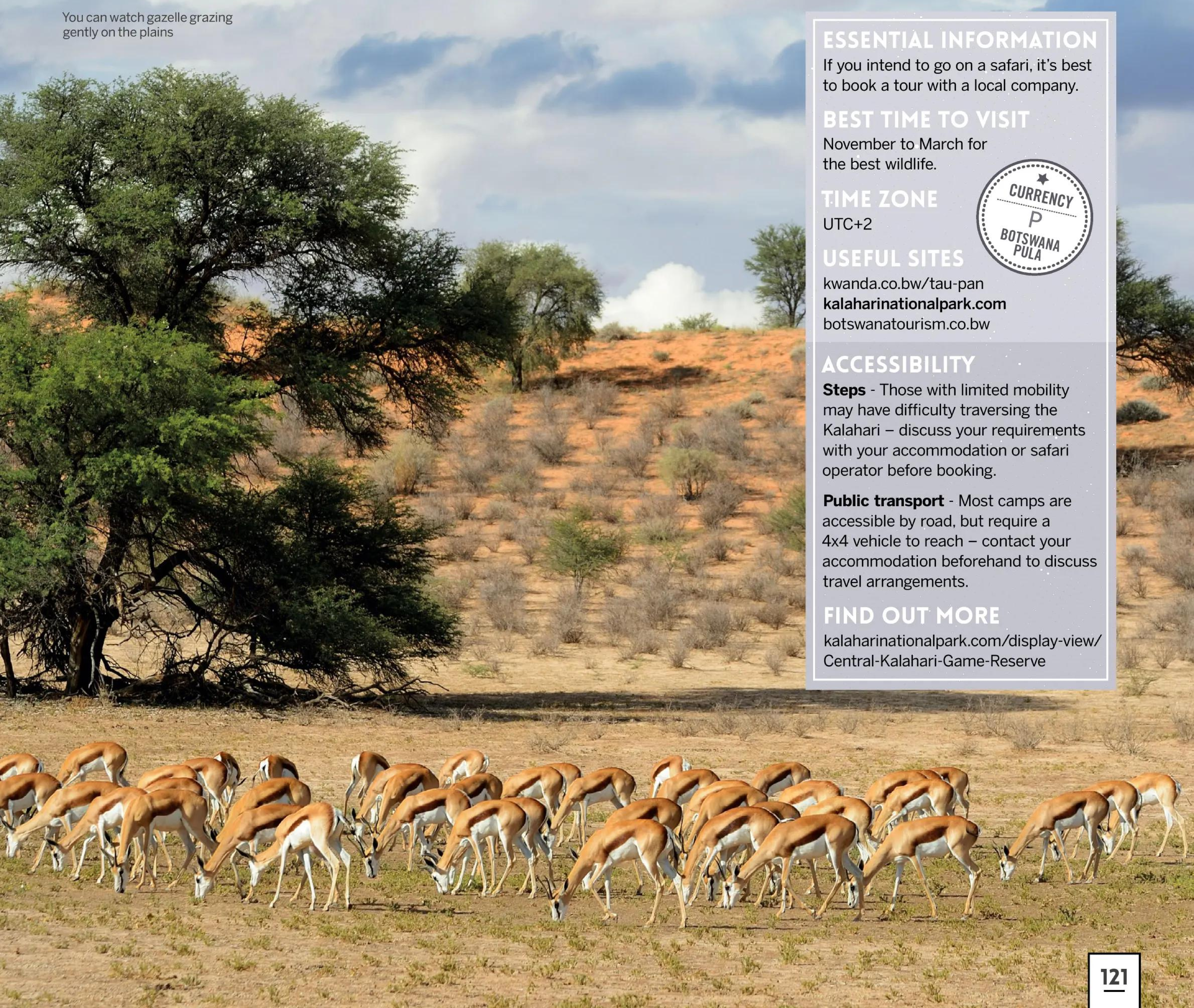
The 900,000 square kilometre desert stretches across Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. However, it's the Central Kalahari Game Reserve that spans Botswana which has the most to offer. Book a spot at the Tau Pan camp, an eco-friendly haven perched on the ridge of a sand dune overlooking the remote Tau Pan lake from which the camp gets its name.

Spend the day with experienced guides on game drives as they take you to locations such as Deception Valley – named for the mirage experience that causes the blue-clay pan to look like it is filled with water – and Piper, Sunday and Passarge Pans, where you'll be able to get a firsthand look at the famous black-maned Kalahari lions, cheetahs, wildebeest, the rare brown hyena and so much more.

Learn about a distant and new culture as you undertake a guided walk with the indigenous San people. Experience their unique way of living and discover how they interact with their harsh environment to create a sustainable lifestyle. If you're lucky, you may be taken to a nearby village to meet the locals.

At night, head to the 'sleep-out deck' – kitted out with a double bed, sink and toilet – and marvel at the clear, unpolluted sky that hangs above the Kalahari, experiencing stargazing like never before.

SPEND THE DAY WITH EXPERIENCED GUIDES ON GAME DRIVES



You can watch gazelle grazing gently on the plains

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If you intend to go on a safari, it's best to book a tour with a local company.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to March for the best wildlife.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

CURRENCY
P
BOTSWANA PULA

USEFUL SITES

kwanda.co.bw/tau-pan
kalaharinationalpark.com
botswanatourism.co.bw

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Those with limited mobility may have difficulty traversing the Kalahari – discuss your requirements with your accommodation or safari operator before booking.

Public transport - Most camps are accessible by road, but require a 4x4 vehicle to reach – contact your accommodation beforehand to discuss travel arrangements.

FIND OUT MORE

kalaharinationalpark.com/display-view/Central-Kalahari-Game-Reserve

84 BEIRUT

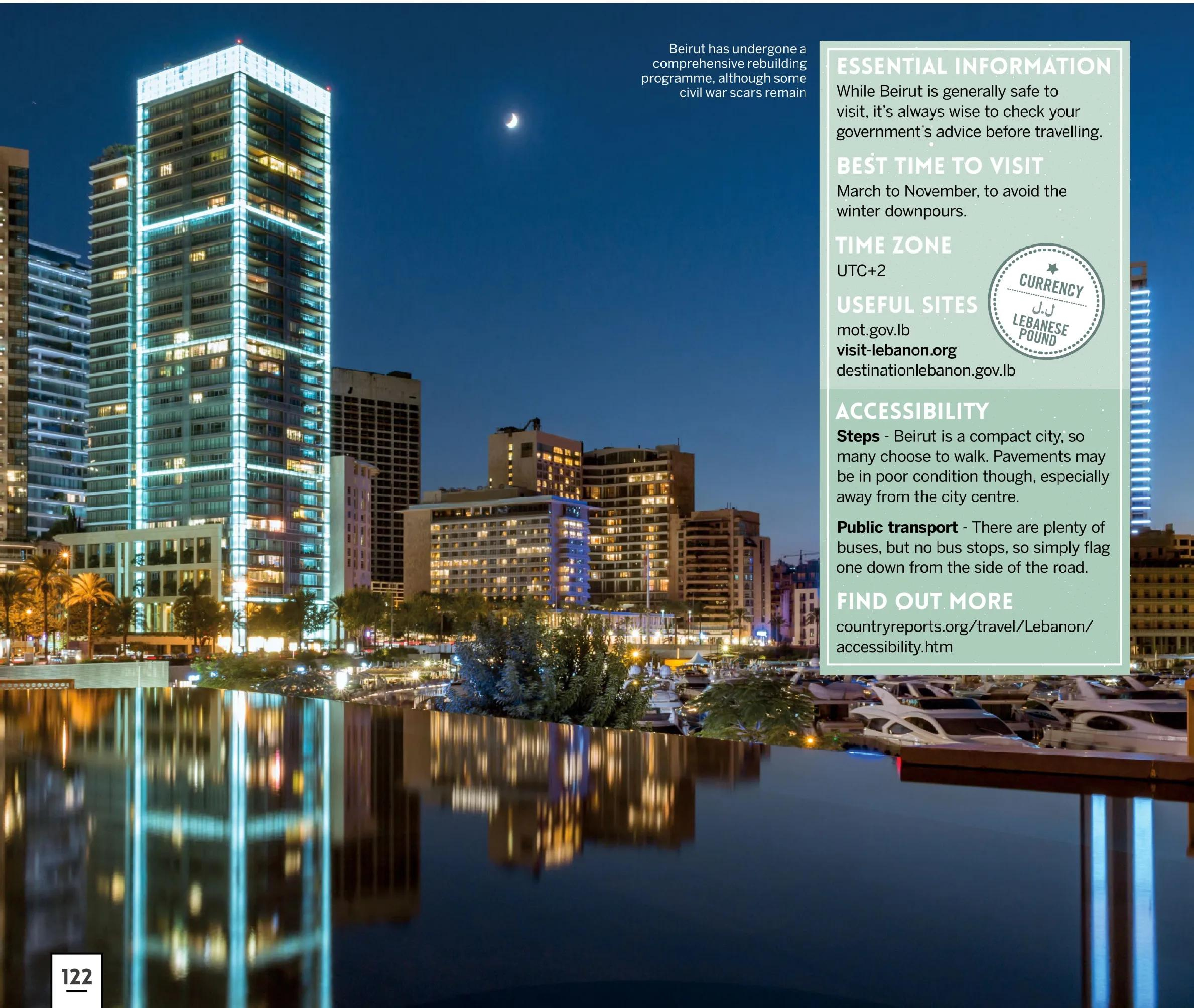
Soak up the atmosphere in the rejuvenated Lebanese capital

Beirut has weathered more than its fair share of troubles during its 5,000-year history. Conquered numerous times during the Classical period and Middle Ages, most recently it was the focal point of the destructive 15-year Lebanese Civil War. However, the gateway to the Levant has reopened to visitors who want to experience a fizzing city where East truly does meet West.

Those who want to dig deep into the city's roots should head to the National Museum of Beirut, where 1,300 archaeological exhibits stretch from the Phoenician to Ottoman periods. If you enjoy uncovering the past, it might be worthwhile seeking out St George's Crypt Museum, the treasures of which were revealed only when a civil war bomb destroyed the Orthodox cathedral above. The Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut also contains a lot of fascinating artefacts.

Beirut isn't really a place for hopping from one tourist site to the next, but rather a place to explore and soak up the atmosphere. Share the corniche with walkers, joggers and cyclists who follow the seafront promenade as it wraps around the city, breezing past new developments like Zaitunay Bay. End your journey at Raouche Rock, a giant stone archway in the sea. Relax with a strong coffee as the sun sets; cafe culture is paramount here, so it's no surprise that Beirut prides itself on being the Paris of the Middle East. No longer the troubled, war-torn capital of decades past, Beirut is a city reborn – and not for the first time.

> **BEIRUT IS A PLACE TO EXPLORE AND SOAK UP THE ATMOSPHERE**



Beirut has undergone a comprehensive rebuilding programme, although some civil war scars remain

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

While Beirut is generally safe to visit, it's always wise to check your government's advice before travelling.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to November, to avoid the winter downpours.

TIME ZONE

UTC+2

USEFUL SITES

mot.gov.lb
visit-lebanon.org
destinationlebanon.gov.lb

CURRENCY
ل.ل
LEBANESE POUND

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Beirut is a compact city, so many choose to walk. Pavements may be in poor condition though, especially away from the city centre.

Public transport - There are plenty of buses, but no bus stops, so simply flag one down from the side of the road.

FIND OUT MORE

countryreports.org/travel/Lebanon/accessibility.htm

Oman offers a sleepier alternative to the decadence of the United Arab Emirates

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

While Oman is accommodating of all cultures, it is a Muslim country and special consideration should be paid to its nuances – for example, only wearing swimwear at the beach.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Although Salalah remains cool during the summer months, October to March boasts the best weather countrywide.

TIME ZONE

UTC+4

USEFUL SITES

experienceoman.om

mwasalat.om

nfc.com

CURRENCY
ر.ع.
OMANI RIAL

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - While Muscat's mountains and coves offer plenty of opportunities for rambling, its increasingly pedestrianised cities like Muscat offer more leisurely coastal routes.

Public transport - Although it has no rail service, Mwasalat operates intercity buses across the country, as well as Baiza buses within Muscat, and ferries run to the Musandam peninsula.

FIND OUT MORE

omantourism.gov.om/wps/portal/mot/tourism/oman/home/accessibility/

85 OMAN

Visit Oman for stunning beaches, historic towns and subtropical valleys

Although Muscat's Mutrah Corniche is aflutter with cars, hawkers and seagulls, there is something deeply calming about it. Even within the deepest recesses of the bazaar, where frankincense hovers past hand-woven rugs and spices are piled high alongside dazzling jewellery, the hospitable Omani spirit never seems to subside. In a region throttling headfirst into the future, this is a city with a deep appreciation for the old world.

Elsewhere, Khasab is a mountainous land, one of winding roads where dolphins swim alongside rickety wooden boats and turtles lay their eggs along the shore. Set at the tip of the Musandam peninsula, the coast is marked by the Arab world's answer to fjords, known as khors. Its resident fishermen and goat herders occupy a unique cultural position, with their own language called Kumzari – a cross between Arabic, Farsi, Hindi, English and Portuguese.

Deeper inland – set within the mighty Al-Hajar mountains – is an oasis town framed by magnificent peaks and bursting with date palms. Despite having once famously turned explorer Wilfred Thesiger away, the town today welcomes guests to explore its historic forts, souq and mosque. On the opposite side of the country, on the southeastern coast and overlooking the Arabian Sea is Salalah. This subtropical city strikes a stunning contrast against the deserts of the north, oozing pearlescent waterfalls from luscious cliffs. The country's second-largest city, it serves as an idyllic diving board for kayak trips across valleys overflowing with greenery.

Though the country packs an incredible amount of diversity into a relatively small region, there is one constant – not a single corner of this country is unspectacular.

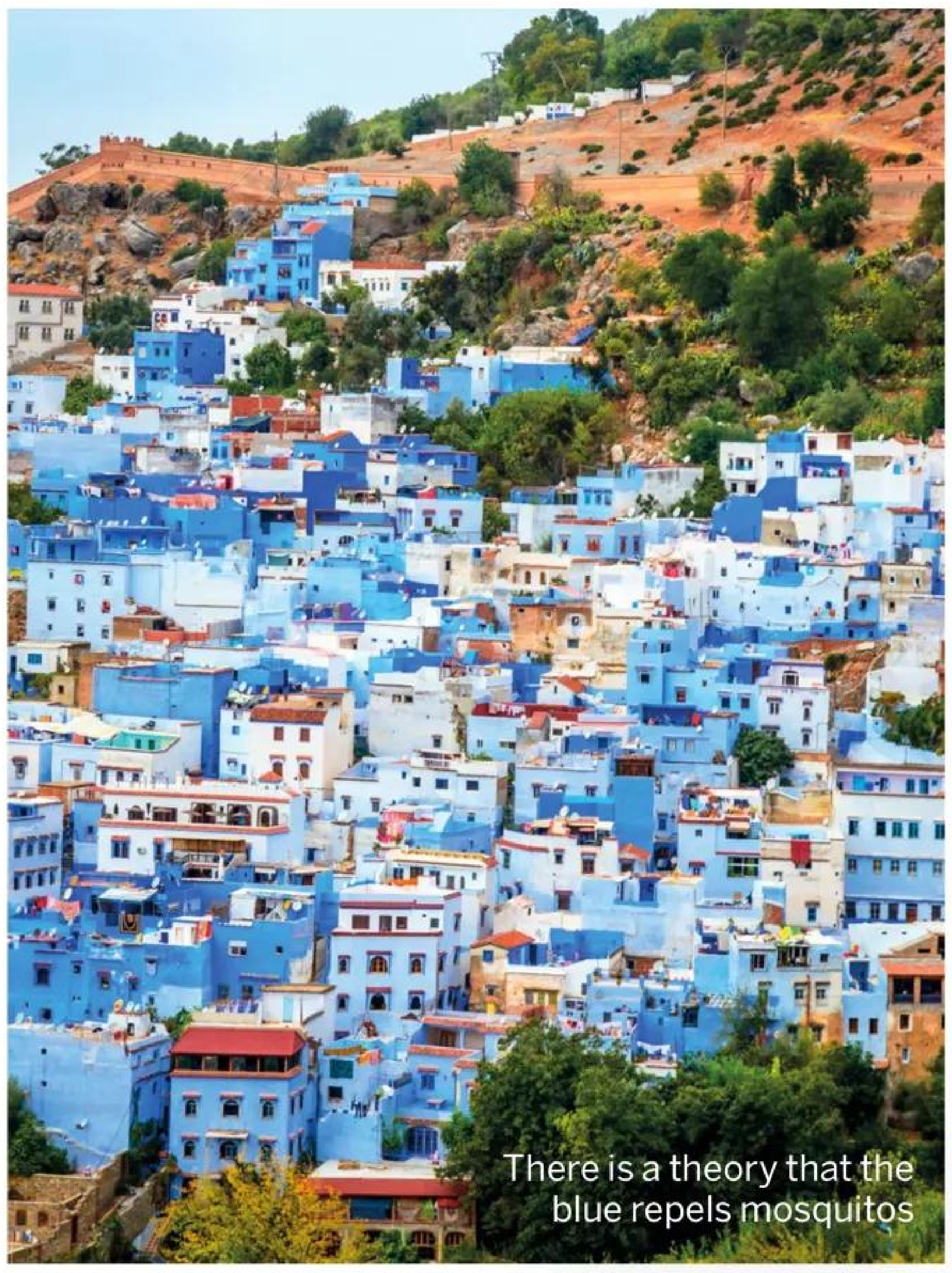
86 CHEFCHAOUEN

Erupting in a cacophony of blue, this dreamy village remains frozen in time

Nestled high in the rippling Rif Mountains between two horned peaks, Morocco's picturesque blue city is steeped in quirky tradition. Modern Chefchaouen is a rich cultural tapestry inspired by the Berber tribes, Muslims, Jews and Moorish exiles that have called the blue-and-white-washed village home.

Fusing Moroccan and Andalusian influences, Chefchaouen's labyrinthine 15th-century medina brims with undiscovered artisanal gems. Brass teapots, silver plates and hand-woven carpets sit alongside sacks of rainbow paint powder beneath a terracotta roof. A short walk through snaking cobblestone backstreets, the town's small-but-charming kasbah looms large. Behind its ochre-hued fortified walls hide a leafy garden, small museum and art gallery. The tower walls offer picture-perfect views, particularly at sunset when the blue sky gives way to cotton-candy clouds and the call to prayer vibrates through the still evening air.

To the north the Spanish Mosque crowns a hilltop carpeted in prickly pear and agave cactuses. Built in the 1920s, it fell into disrepair, but was carefully restored in 2010 and opened to the public. From the soaring minaret, grandstand views of the sprawling town unfold in a rainbow of blue – from cerulean to cobalt and azure to periwinkle. Those seeking adventure head to Akchour, where forested valleys, bottomless gorges and picturesque peaks unravel to reveal waterfalls and crystalline pools. A 45-minute climb heavenward culminates in Pont de Dieu, or God's Bridge, a natural 80-foot-high stone arch spanning the river below. Alternatively, several multi-day treks, which wind through Talassemtane National Park, begin just outside Chefchaouen.



There is a theory that the blue repels mosquitos

Painted blue to reflect the heavens, the buildings of Chefchaouen are given a fresh coat of paint multiple times a year.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Relatively inaccessible, the best way to get to Chefchaouen is to fly into Fes and hire a driver to tackle the four-hour journey.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May or September to November.

TIME ZONE

UTC+1

CURRENCY
MAD
MOROCCAN DIRHAM

USEFUL SITES

visitmorocco.com
infostourismemaroc.com
linaryad.com

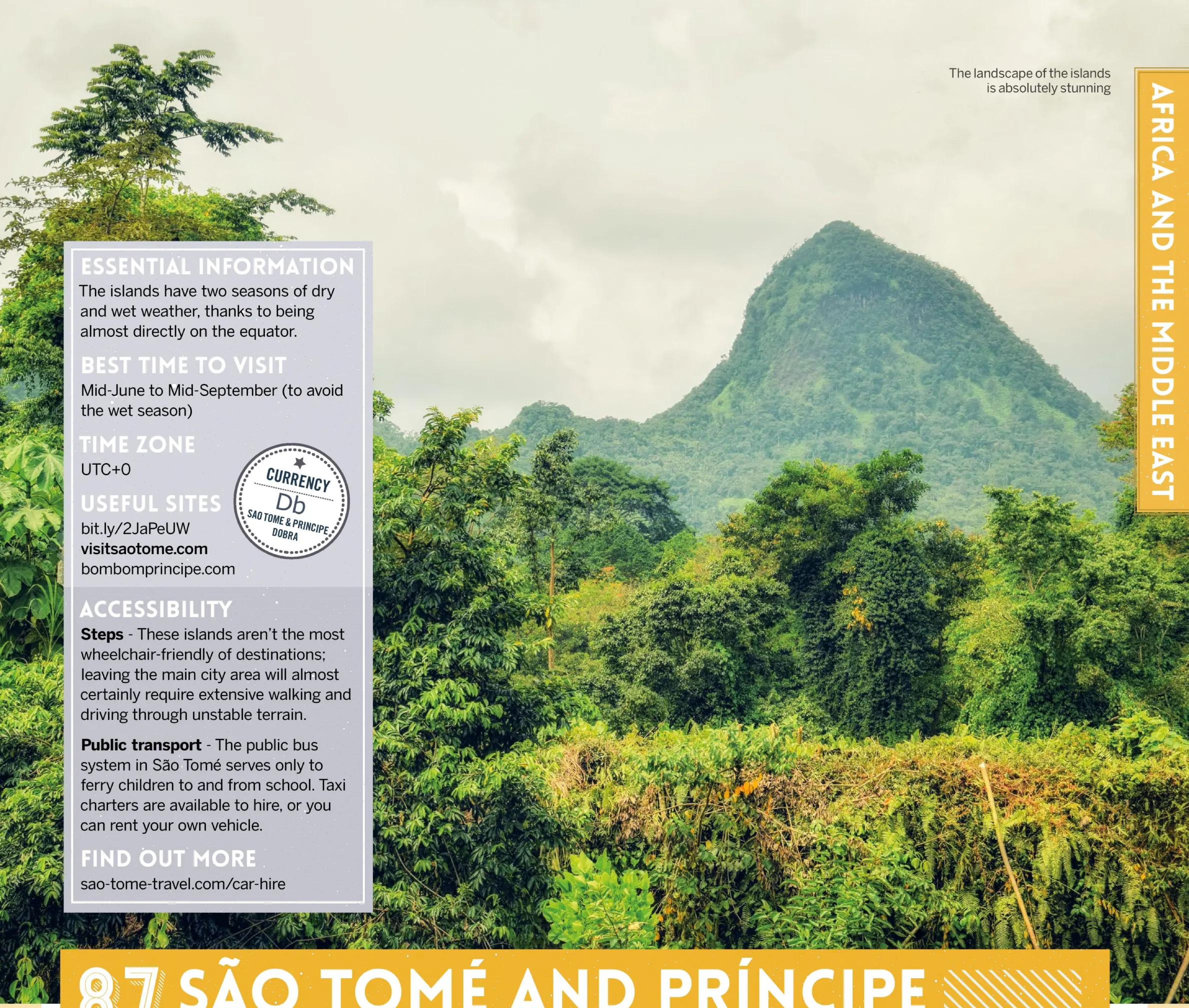
ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Relatively compact, Chefchaouen is small enough to explore on foot, but its streets are sloping and steep staircases are not uncommon.

Public transport - While there are buses linking Chefchaouen to major cities, inside the town public transport is limited.

FIND OUT MORE

moroccoaccessibletravel.com



The landscape of the islands is absolutely stunning

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The islands have two seasons of dry and wet weather, thanks to being almost directly on the equator.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Mid-June to Mid-September (to avoid the wet season)

TIME ZONE

UTC+0

CURRENCY
Db
SAO TOME & PRINCIPE DOBRA

USEFUL SITES

bit.ly/2JaPeUW
visitsaotome.com
bombomprincipe.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - These islands aren't the most wheelchair-friendly of destinations; leaving the main city area will almost certainly require extensive walking and driving through unstable terrain.

Public transport - The public bus system in São Tomé serves only to ferry children to and from school. Taxi charters are available to hire, or you can rent your own vehicle.

FIND OUT MORE

sao-tome-travel.com/car-hire

87 SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE

Get adventurous on an unspoiled island getaway

Just off Africa's western coastline you'll find a world that time forgot: the beautiful islands of São Tomé and Príncipe. They are two Jurassic-esque wonderlands boasting expansive rainforests, bountiful wildlife and sandy, white beaches, perfect for those looking to embrace their adventurous side.

Consider spending an afternoon at one of São Tomé's many beaches – they include Praia Museu (great for interacting with the locals), Praia Messias Alves (an ideal spot for diving and snorkelling), and the idyllic Praia Piscina. Finally, there's Praia Jalé, a tiny slice of paradise where you can have the chance to spend the night on the beach and watch giant sea turtles lay their eggs in the sand the following morning.

As you wander through the colourful city of São Tomé, stop by the Claudio Corallo Chocolate Factory for a tour and the São Sebastião and National Museum for a complete overview of the country's entire history (though bring a guide as it's entirely in Portuguese), before tucking into some local delicacies like flying fish, sea snails and a bat stew often served during festivals.

Make sure to head to the Bom Bom Island Resort, a tiny forested islet located off the north coast of Princípe, where you'll be able to undertake a range of thrilling excursions from snorkelling to gorge swimming, kayaking and even dolphin watching. For those who prefer to take things a little slower, the resort also offers opportunities for birdwatching, rainforest (marvel at the hundreds of unique plant and animal species that call the island) or coastal strolls and nature photography walks.

Be prepared for beautifully picturesque streets

OCEANIA

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96 FRENCH POLYNESIA
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97 ROTORUA
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98 NEW CALEDONIA
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99 FRASER ISLAND
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100 AUCKLAND
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101 PERTH
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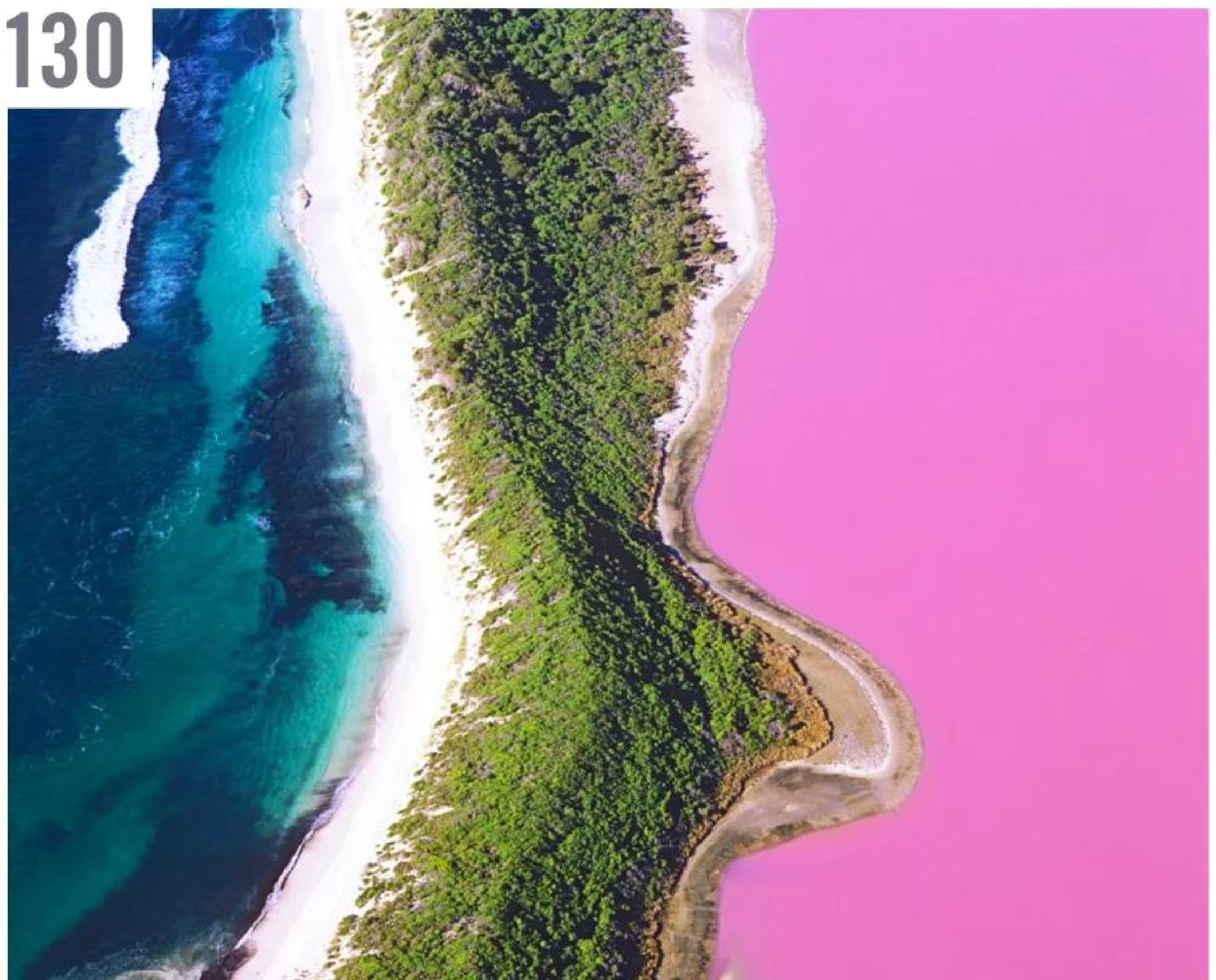


130

137

88 GREAT BARRIER REEF

Australia's natural wonder is stunning from above and below the water

The Great Barrier Reef is the largest living structure on the planet, and the only one visible from space. It stretches over 2,300 kilometres (1,429 miles) off the coast of Queensland, Australia, from Cairns up to the Daintree rainforest, and is made up of 3,000 coral reefs and hundreds of islands. Legendary in its reputation, this remarkable wonder of the natural world attracts more than 1.5 million visitors a year.

There's such a huge diversity of marine species in and around the Great Barrier Reef that it was named a World Heritage Site in 1981 for its scientific significance. Whether you're viewing it from a glass-bottomed boat or through a snorkel, the life on the reef is breathtaking. 2,000 species of fish dart between bright anemones and lurk on the seabed; sharks drift over the branching coral; and manta rays glide serenely through the water. Seabirds such as pelicans fly overhead, and lucky travellers can spot dolphins and whales leaping from the waves.

Experienced divers are spoilt for choice, with seemingly endless reef to explore. The Yongala, a steamer sunk by a cyclone in 1911, now lies 28 metres (92 feet) below the surface and is considered one of the best wreck dives in the world. Those not so used to life in a wetsuit needn't feel left out – snorkeling in the crystal-clear waters is an exhilarating activity available to anyone comfortable in the water. Even visitors happier just looking at the water can experience the reef close up; ReefHQ is the largest living reef aquarium on the planet, with the coral ecosystem replicated on land.

Of course, the best way to see the whole reef is from the air. Helicopters and light aircraft leave from Cairns and Airlie Beach aiports to offer breathtaking views of the whole coast. For the daredevils, there's the opportunity to leave the comfort of the plane and skydive over the Whitsunday Islands.

The Whitsundays, 74 idyllic islands scattered across the turquoise water of the reef, are high on the to-do lists of many visitors. Landing at the Whitsunday Coast airport near Proserpine, it's a 25-minute bus journey to Airlie Beach. This resort town is a hive of activity with beaches, swimming areas, nightclubs and a marina full of boats ready to set sail for tours of the islands. Tours can last a few hours or several days depending on your schedule and budget; overnight visitors can camp, stay in island lodges or let the waves send them to sleep in the cabin of a boat.

An aerial view of coral, Heart Reef and the turquoise waters at Hardy Reef

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Pack plenty of suncream and a pair of sunglasses, and only swim where you're told it's safe to do so.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

June to October (temperatures aren't too stifling)

TIME ZONE

UTC+10

CURRENCY
$
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

visitcairns.com.au
greatbarrierreef.org
daintreerainforest.com

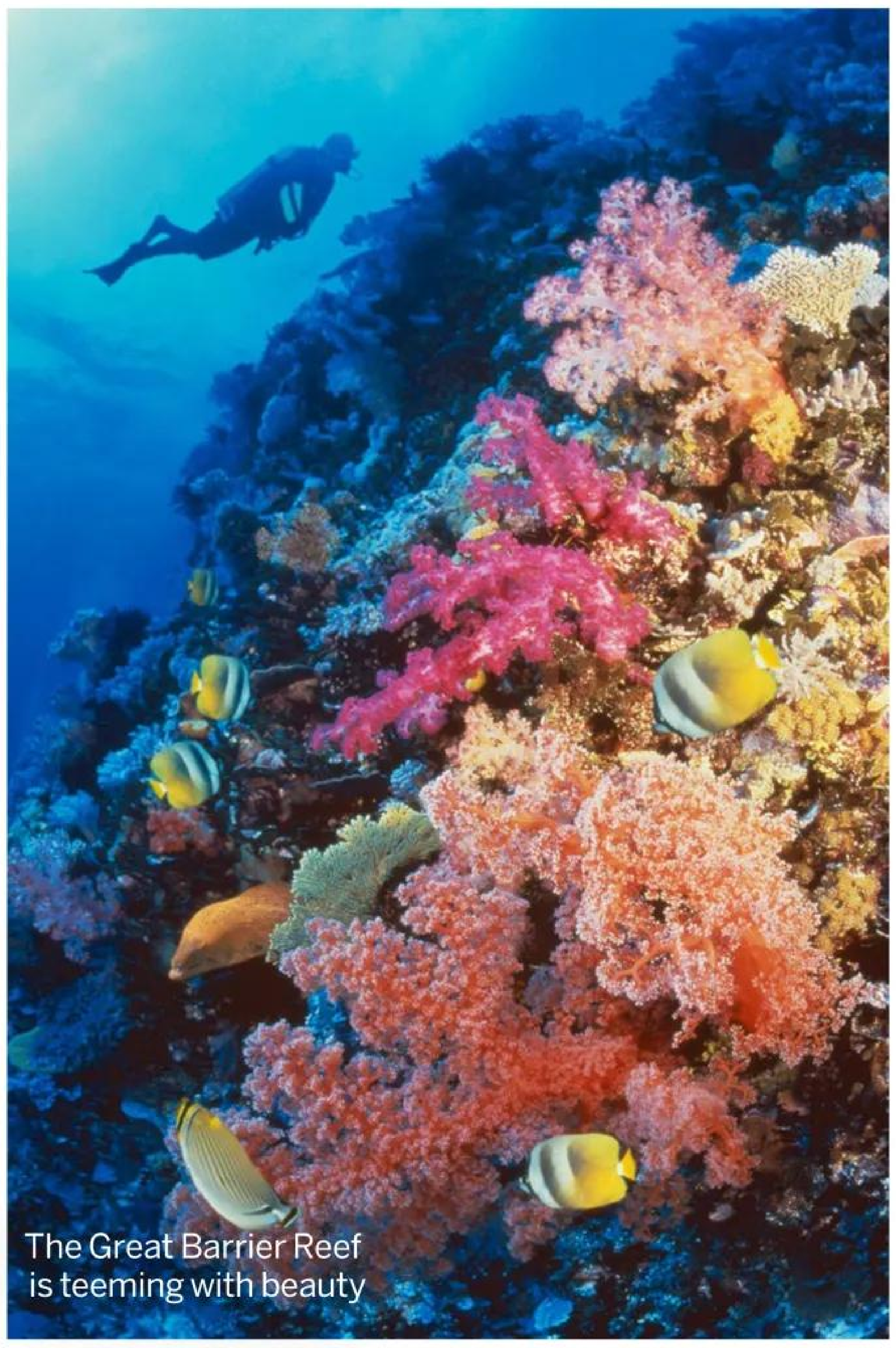
ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Permanently moored pontoons on the reef are a good base to explore from. The Port Douglas platform has a hydraulic lift that lowers directly into the water.

Public transport - From the mainland, take a boat or plane to access the reef. Enjoy the marine wonders via glass-bottomed boats, semi-submersibles or even underwater scooters.

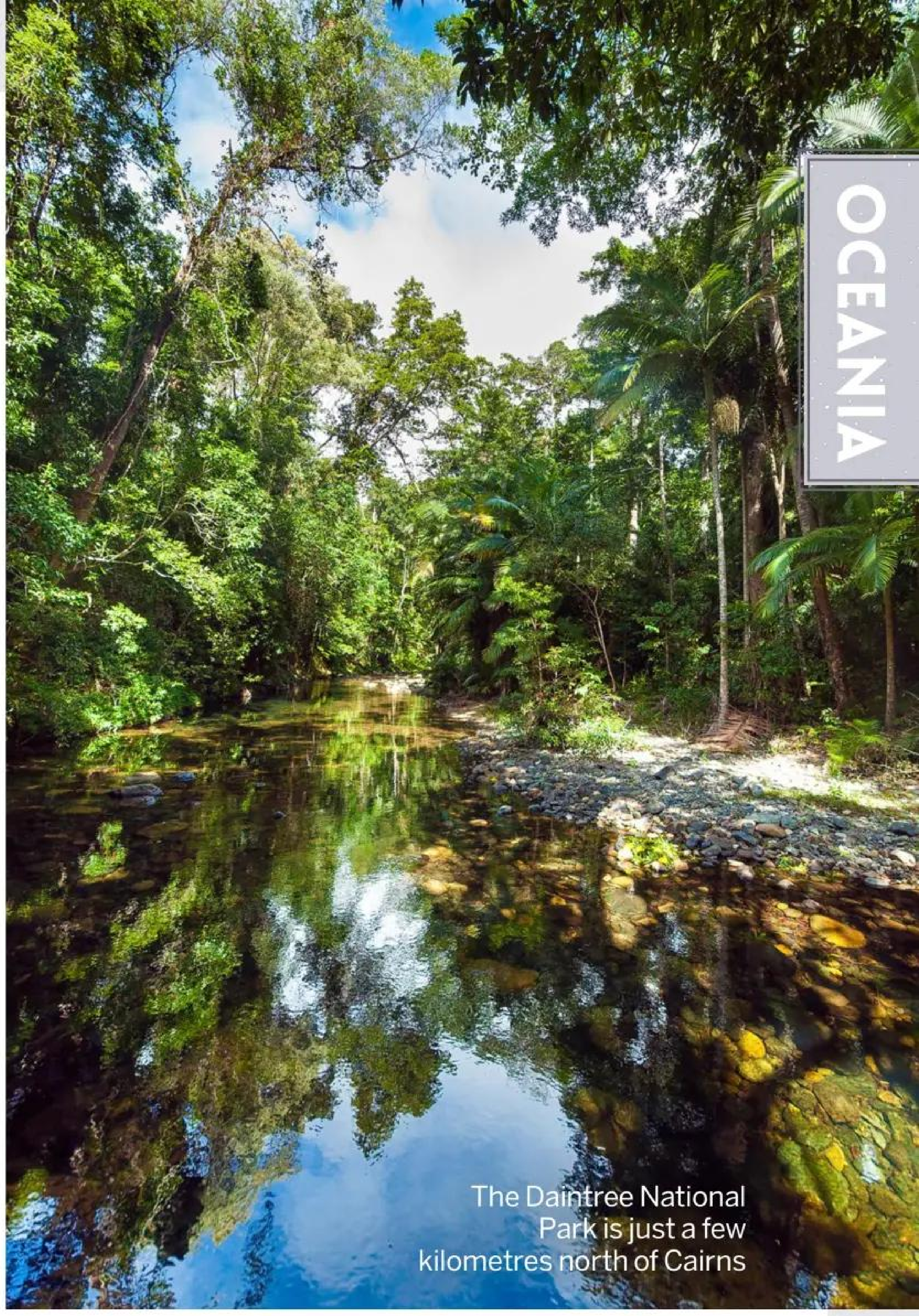
FIND OUT MORE

thetourspecialists.com.au/travel-tips/disabled-travelers/great-barrier-reef-for-disabled-travelers.545.html

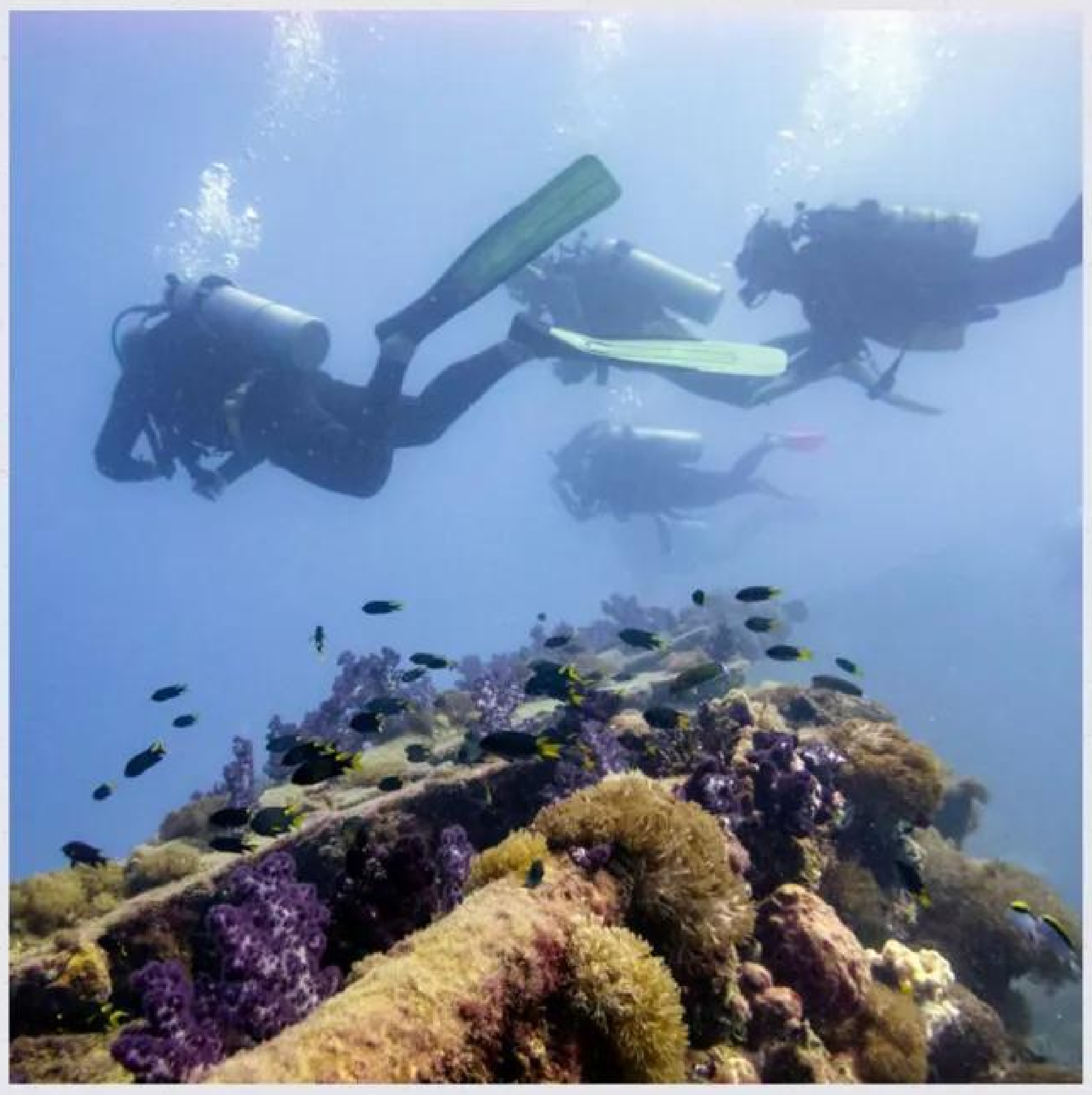


The Great Barrier Reef is teeming with beauty

Go snorkelling or diving for a chance to see turtles and more



The Daintree National Park is just a few kilometres north of Cairns



SEE IT UP CLOSE

Diving and snorkelling in the waters of the Great Barrier Reef are wonderful experiences for both the seasoned explorer and those wanting to try it for the first time, and most tour operators will accommodate for both. If you're concerned about swimming through crowded water, don't worry – the reef is vast, and there are many locations for exploring what lies beneath, so you won't be swimming shoulder to shoulder with a stranger.

The water has comfortable temperatures all year round, but what you will see will vary throughout the year. For example, between June and November you have a greater chance of spotting whales.

If you are an experienced scuba diver and want to try something different, you should look into exploring the SS Yongala, a passenger ship that sank in 1911. Some operators may briefly pass by this, but there are others that offer a tour of the wreckage, so make sure you find the best tour operator to suit your needs.

OF COURSE, THE BEST WAY TO SEE THE WHOLE REEF IS FROM THE AIR

When you feel ready for a break from island-hopping and golden beaches, head inland to the Daintree Rainforest. Entering the dense jungle, teeming with unusual creatures and strange sounds, is like stepping into another world. It's home to some of Australia's unique animals such as possums, tree kangaroos and forest dragons. Tread quietly and you might even catch a glimpse of the world's third largest bird, the dinosaur-like cassowary.

If dangerous birds aren't your thing, Conway National Park just behind Airlie Beach plays host to daintier birds like cockatoos and kingfishers. Rent some mountain bikes and head out to the dusty tracks, so you can fly through the rainforest alongside them.

Combining water and wilderness, Heron Island is a protected Marine National Park and the perfect place to spend a quiet few days soaking up the sun and marvelling at the nature. Plan a trip between November and March and you'll be able to watch turtles laying eggs and hatching on the beach.

The Great Barrier Reef sits at the top of millions of bucket lists. In case any more persuasion is needed, just remember this: Sir David Attenborough himself said that it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

From Airlie Beach, you can catch a boat to the reef

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Middle Island can only be visited using a licenced tour operator.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May (for the best weather)

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

CURRENCY
$
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

australia.com/en-gb/places/perth-and-surrounds/guide-to-pink-lake.html
esperancecruises.com.au/lakehillier

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The lake cannot be accessed by foot, but many tours operate out of Esperance, with the option to book a vessel for a private boat tour.

Public transport - Some of the best views are from the air, and many companies offer helicopter or plane tours going right above the lake.

FIND OUT MORE

goldfieldsairservices.com/scenic-flights

89 LAKE HILLIER

The pretty-in-pink Australian lake that stuns tourists and scientists alike

Think of a lake. You're probably imagining a cool, blue expanse of water. Maybe even turquoise or aquamarine. You certainly won't be imagining water the colour of a flamingo, but that is the sight that would greet you if you visit the unique and spectacular Lake Hillier. Situated on Middle Island, just off the coast of Western Australia, the lake is a bright-pink colour all year round, for reasons scientists still can't quite agree on. Some believe it is due to a bacteria found in the water, while others think it's caused by Dunaliella salina microalgae. One thing everyone can agree on, however, is that it looks both bizarre and incredible – especially as it's just metres from the Pacific Ocean that remains determinedly and traditionally blue, resulting in an amazing contrast when viewed from above.

Lake Hillier isn't the only pink lake in the world, but it is unique as the one that retains its colour even when the water is removed and bottled. Discovered by British explorer Matthew Flinders in 1802, Lake Hillier was named after William Hillier – one of Flinders' fellow HMS Investigator sailors who had sadly died of dysentery. Lake Hillier, which is on the small side at around 600 by 250 metres (1,968 by 820 feet), was mined for its salt for six years, but mining stopped when it was discovered that the salt was too toxic for human consumption. Middle Island is now a nature reserve, with only a limited number of tourists allowed onto the island. One of the best ways to see Lake Hillier in all its glory is by helicopter, as it is at its most vibrant from the air and you can fully appreciate the contrast with the Pacific.

Another option is a cruise from Esperance – the closest town to Middle Island. Now, the big question that all once-in-a-lifetime-experience seekers will want to know: can you swim in a bubblegum lake for the ultimate holiday snap? You can, but the Esperance Visitor Centre says you probably wouldn't really want to due to the high salt levels and shallow depth. The water has been tested and it is perfectly safe to swim in. The microalgae is harmless; there aren't any creatures that will try and have a nibble on you, and the pink won't stain your body. The salt levels are comparable to the Dead Sea in the Middle East, which is also perfectly safe to swim in, but it wouldn't make for the most satisfying swim ever – so probably just dip in for the photo opportunity and out again.

Whichever way you experience Lake Hillier – via land, sea or sky – this is a sight that no self-respecting traveller can miss out on. Where else can you see nature's daiquiri nestled among the trees of an Australian nature reserve, and get your friends scrabbling to find what filter you used to create that unbelievable shot?

90 SAMOA

Find a piece of paradise in the Pacific and live life the 'Samoan Way'

Fa'a Samoa – the Samoan Way, the way of life for the people who call this small Pacific Island nation home – makes Samoa one of the few traditional cultures that the outside world seems unable to spoil. Those lucky enough to be cast adrift in this island idyll are isolated from external influences by thousands of miles of ocean and a refreshingly simple approach to life.

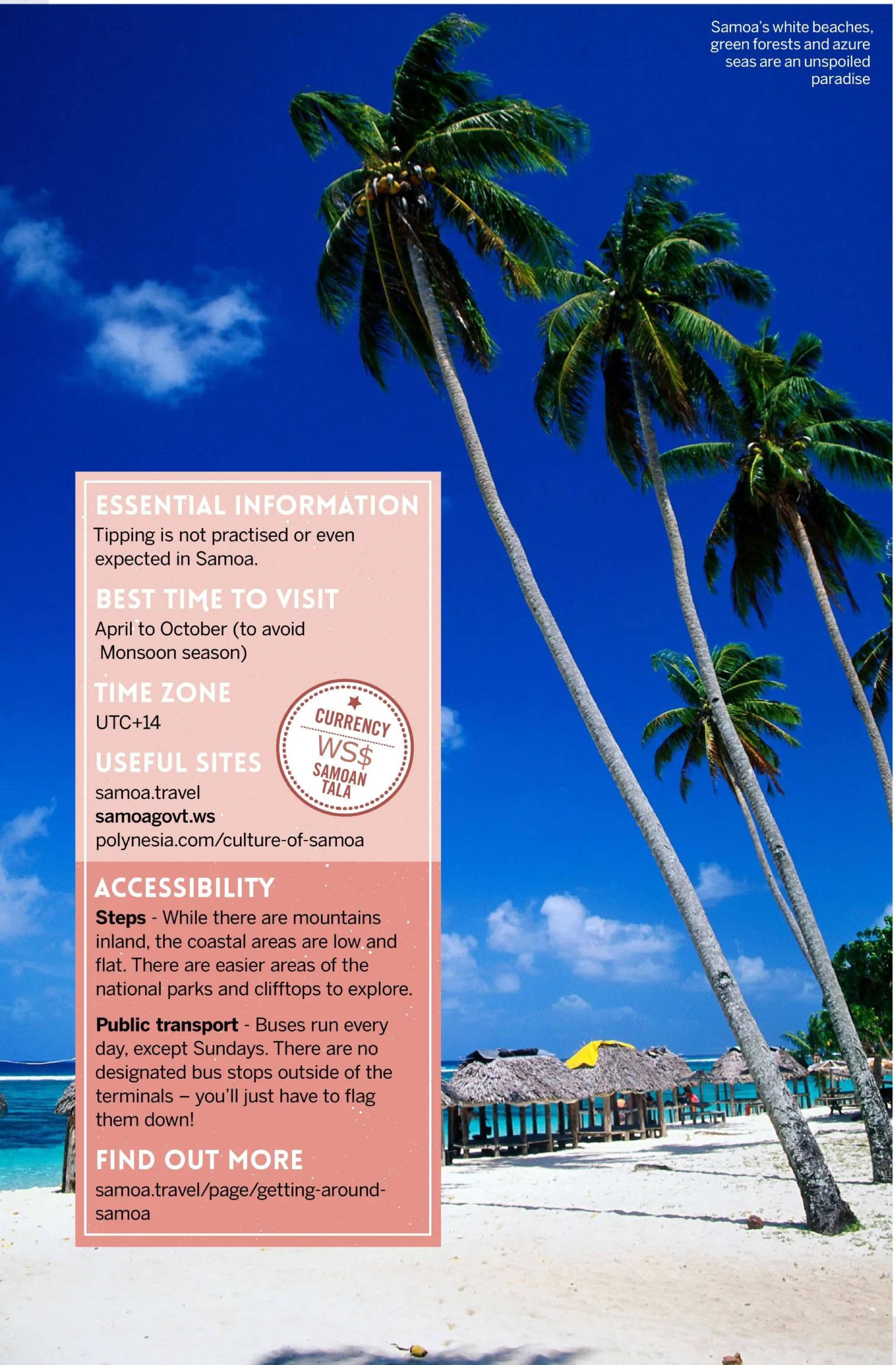
The star of the show is the Pacific Island scenery: iridescent seas, white beaches, lush forests and crystal waterfalls. Among the highlights is To Sua Ocean Trench, a volcanic complex consisting of two giant holes linked by a cave. One of the holes is now a deep pool enjoyed by local swimmers and tourists alike. Another popular place to take a dip is Afu Aau Falls, a spectacular waterfall that plunges into a sloping freshwater pool. What better way to exercise than swimming laps in a rainforest?

Samoa's population is split between two volcanic islands, the larger of which – Savai'i – is still active. Some of its surface is covered in cooled lava from a six-year eruption that began in 1905 and slowly buried whole villages underneath the slow but unstoppable trudge of the molten rock. Extinct craters, ancient peaks and black sands are constant reminders that you are standing on a shield volcano. The Alofaaga Blowholes, on the southern coast of the island, is where volcano and ocean meet – when waves break against the cliff, water shoots up old lava tubes to create spectacular fountains of spray.

The other island, Upolu, is home to three quarters of the population and the capital, Apia, a charming, tropical harbour and the best place to explore the Samoan Way. The Samoan Cultural Centre has demonstrations of authentic crafts and cooking – even traditional Polynesian tattooing of brave tourists by a master artist. Apia is also the best place to take in a Fiafia night, a dinner performance of traditional songs and dancing by locals in colourful costume. This was the Samoa with which novelist Robert Louis Stevenson fell in love and spent his final years. Tour his home just outside the capital, now a museum, and visit his grave for spectacular views from the top of Mount Vaea.

For the most genuine experience of the Samoan Way, join one of the many available tours that include a village stop. The open and welcoming locals will be happy to let you wander freely and observe life in their fale – open houses with no walls, and blinds made from coconut palm fronds.

Samoans have kept the outside world at a distance, but it can't be avoided altogether. In 2011, the islands jumped across the international date line, skipping 30 December, to enable easier trade and commerce with Australia and New Zealand. High-speed internet is now available to smartphone-wielding teenagers, and multinational hotelier Sheraton has two resorts. It means that those who like their paradise unspoiled should go now and sample the Samoan Way before the rest of the world leaves too much of a mark.



Samoa's white beaches, green forests and azure seas are an unspoiled paradise

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Tipping is not practised or even expected in Samoa.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

April to October (to avoid Monsoon season)

TIME ZONE

UTC+14

CURRENCY
WS$
SAMOAN TALA

USEFUL SITES

samoa.travel
samoagovt.ws
polynesia.com/culture-of-samoa

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - While there are mountains inland, the coastal areas are low and flat. There are easier areas of the national parks and clifftops to explore.

Public transport - Buses run every day, except Sundays. There are no designated bus stops outside of the terminals – you'll just have to flag them down!

FIND OUT MORE

samoa.travel/page/getting-around-samoa

WHAT BETTER WAY TO EXERCISE THAN SWIMMING LAPS IN A RAINFOREST?

91 SYDNEY

Rich sunshine, culture and wildlife make for a wealthy experience down under

When visiting Australia, there is no place more vibrant and more exciting to be than its capital city of Sydney. Depending on the time of year you visit, there is always a multitude of things to see and do, from the golden sands of Bondi Beach in the height of summer to the world's most impressive firework display to see in the New Year. However, if you find yourself in the neighbourhood on any given day and are in need of something fun, then you will not be disappointed by the sights and scenes of Sydney life.

To really experience the beauty of the city, head straight to Sydney Harbour Bridge. The best way to access and experience the majestic structure, which stands at 504 metres (1,654 feet) tall and stretches from the Sydney central business district (CBD) to the North Shore, is on foot. When there, you will find the best views accessed via the southeastern climb to Pylon Lookout or via the Sydney Harbour Bridge climb, which has a summit of 134 metres (440 feet). While the views in the day from the bridge are beyond belief, taking a trip at night is a guaranteed way to see one of the most breathtaking views in the entire world. If heights don't exactly thrill you then not to worry, the bridge offers a variety of options when it comes to your ascension. Whichever you choose, there is plenty to admire.

One of the sights most obvious from the bridge is the world-famous Sydney Opera House. Designed by Danish architect Jørn Utzon and founded in 1973, this World Heritage-listed building is Australia's most famous landmark. Either choose one of the 40 shows put on every week to attend in order to experience the space in all its glory, take a one-hour guided tour, or pay for a two-hour backstage tour (which departs at 7am and includes breakfast in the Green Room as well as an unlimited access-all-areas pass so you can explore the building). Please note that ongoing renovation work, which is scheduled until 2021, may disrupt your tour. For architecture enthusiasts, a visit to St Mary's Cathedral is a must-see, especially around Christmas when the building becomes the platform for impressive light displays. Stunning features of the Gothic Revival cathedral, which was modelled after Paris's Notre Dame, include a beautiful terrazzo-tiled floor in the crypt, and stained-glass windows. For an even more heavenly experience, visit on a Sunday at around 10.30am, when the famous choir sings.

Lots of amazing adventures in Sydney will burn straight through your wallet, so if you're looking for free tours and experiences, then you can certainly find something to take the pressure off the purse strings. Every day at 10.30am (except on public holidays), a free tour commences at the Royal Botanic Garden. In and among the varying plants and flowers, you will spot beautiful birds and butterflies, as well as reptiles and fish. It is worth noting that all reptiles are protected by law, and in Sydney

WITH MORE THAN 100 BACHES IN SYDNEY, YOU'LL BE SPOILT FOR CHOICE

The Sydney Opera House has a number of options available to tourists that allow them to experience this magnificent building both inside and out

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The city centre is just a 20-minute train or taxi ride from the airport.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September to November or March to May (for more comfortable temperatures and less tourists)

TIME ZONE

UTC-10

CURRENCY
$
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

uk.sydney.com
sydneyoperahouse.com
bridgeclimb.com

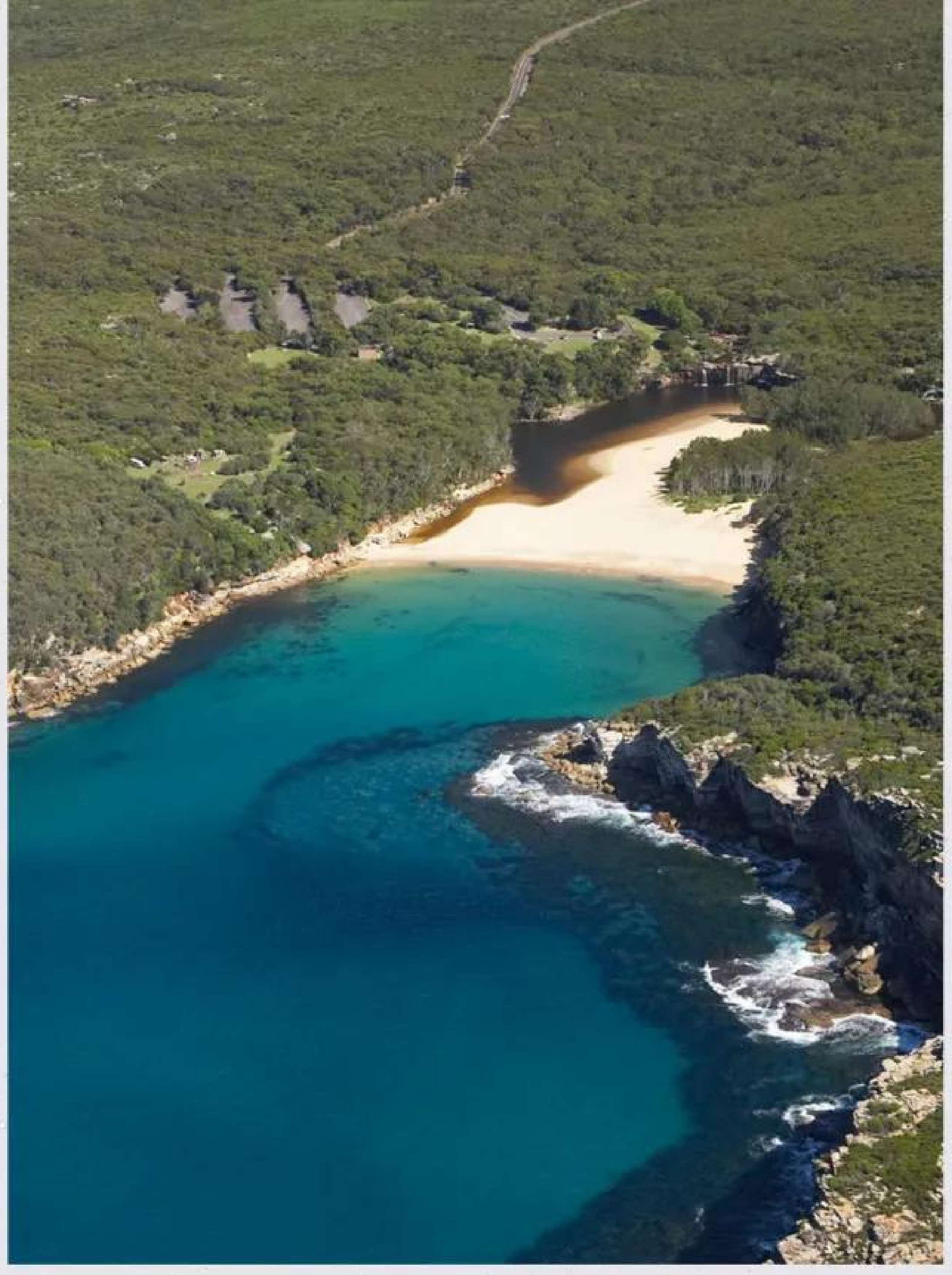
ACCESSIBILITY

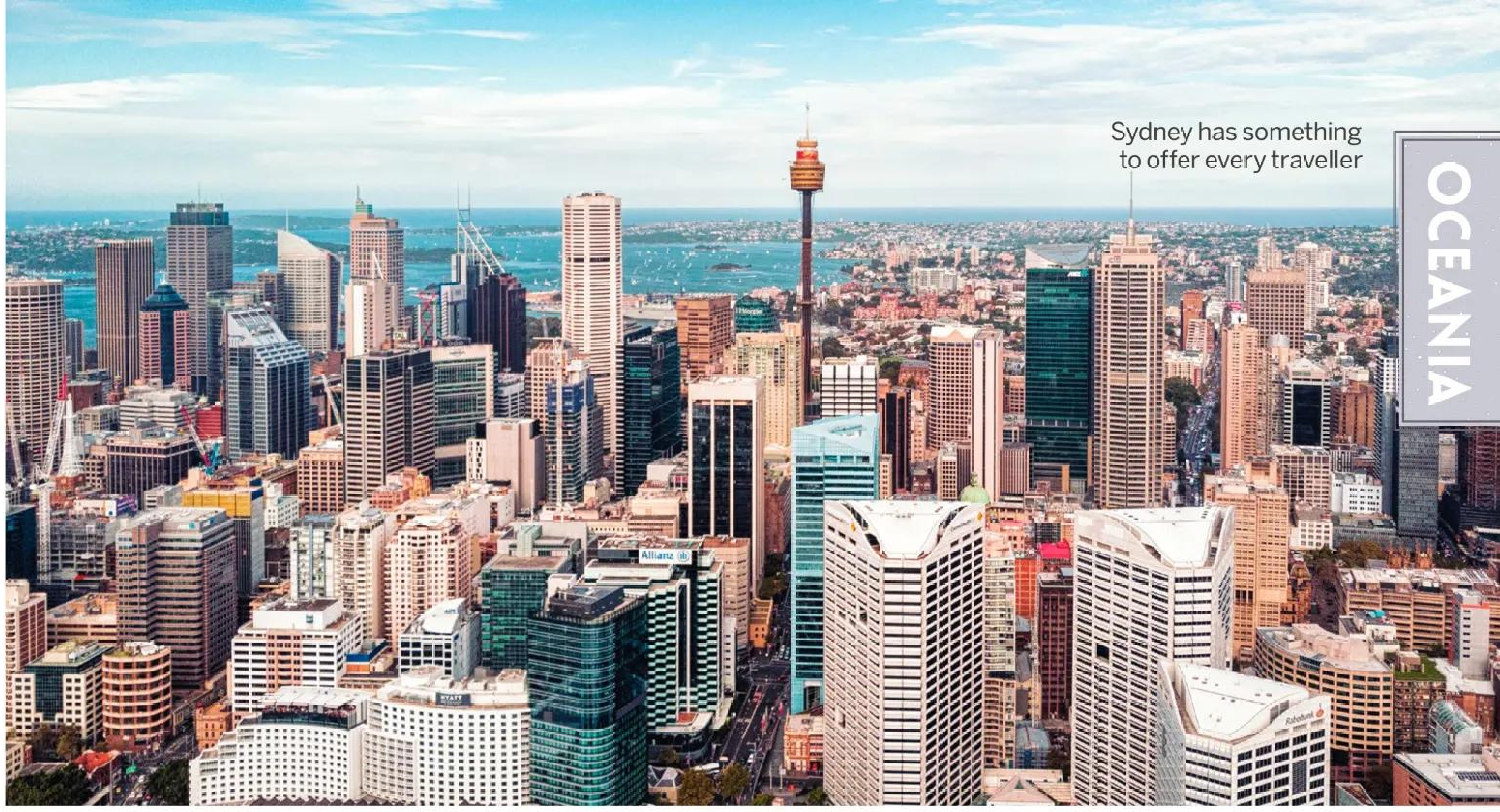
Steps - The city is mostly flat and accessible. Some areas have slopes or stairways, but can often be avoided by taking a detour or alternative route.

Public transport - Buses and trains run throughout the city. Ferries from Circular Quay are also a convenient way to get to nearby attractions.

FIND OUT MORE

cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/explore/getting-around/accessibility





Sydney has something to offer every traveller

BEST SECLUDED BEACHES

RESOLUTE BEACH
This gorgeous private beach is a must-see while you're in town. Accessed via the Resolute Loop Trail in the in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park from the Resolute Picnic area, you will find glistening emerald waters with panoramic views of Pittwater and the Barrenjoey Headland.

MAITLAND BAY
One of the most secluded beaches in Sydney, Maitland Bay has plenty of opportunities to find a quiet spot. Accessed via a popular bushtrail in Bouddi National Park known as the Maitland Bay Track, low tides on the eastern side of the beach will reveal the remains of the SS Maitland shipwreck that ran aground in May 1898.

WATTAMOLLA BEACH
Located along the famous Royal Coastal Walk in the Royal National Park, you will discover Wattamolla Beach. Featuring a tranquil lagoon, waterfall and crystal-clear waters, it is an amazing spot for snorkellers, kayaking and a cooling dip.

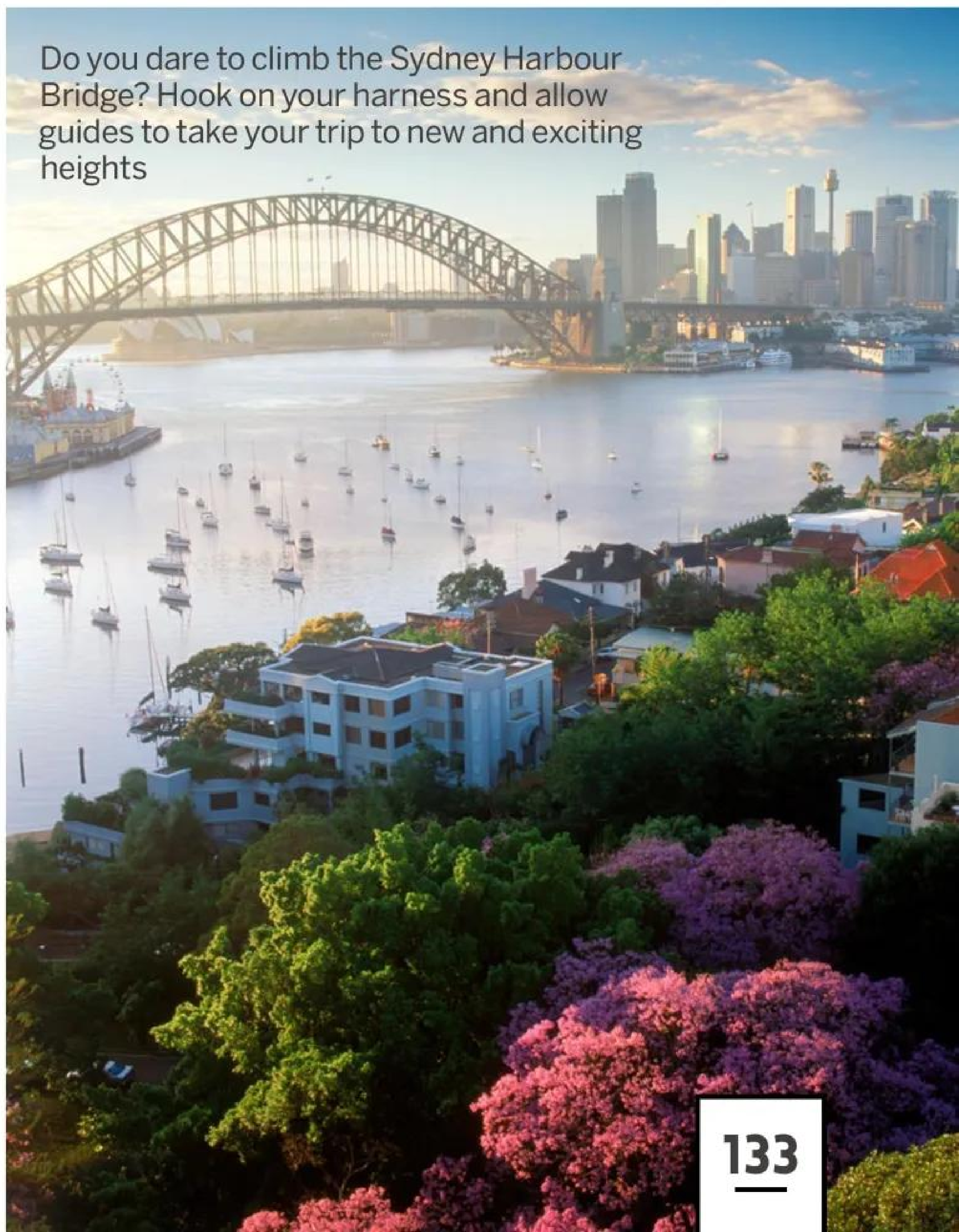
many native species have poisonous bites, so be sure to check safety information on what to do if you think you have been bitten before you head off for a trek. The Art Gallery of New South Wales is also free and worth a visit for travelling art lovers. An impressive building that looks like something straight out of Greek mythology, it is home to more than 30 temporary and passing exhibitions every year, as well as its regular collections of artwork.

With more than 100 beaches in Sydney to visit, you will be spoilt for choice. To experience the hustle and bustle of sunbathers, surfers and tourist hot spots, head to Bondi Beach or Coogee Beach, but if you fancy delving off the beaten track to somewhere quieter, a number of private and secluded beaches are accessible around Sydney, such as the Resolute Beach in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. If you have a few hours to kill or even a whole day, then the Manly to Spit coastal walk is well worth the effort. With a multitude of different experiences packed into this trek through a variety of atmospheres, from lush bushland and scenic harbourside trails, you can experience a relaxed swim at Castle Rock Beach to the party scene at Reef Bay. The experience can be done from Manly Beach to Spit Bridge, but you can decide what's right for you. Why not try it back-to-front for a unique experience of Australia's coast?

Sydney has one of the most impressive wildlife experiences on offer across the world. If you happen to visit between May and August then you will be joined by 20,000 humpback whales who are heading north via the New South Wales coastline towards the warmer waters, as winter temperatures have them searching for more suitable waters to mate and give birth in. In the summer months, they return to the southern waters with their calves to feed in Antarctic waters where food is bountiful. Unfortunately for tourists, recent changes in legislation mean that nowhere in New South Wales will permit the handling of koala bears, however Sydney Zoo is a great place to observe them. If you are pushed for time to see the wide spectrum of wildlife down under, under the zoo's roof you will find koalas, wallabies, kangaroos, crocodiles, wombats and more Antipodean animals. Another great place to find a collection of wildlife is Taronga Zoo. A 12-minute ferry ride from Circular Quay, this bushy harbour hillside park features all the native Australian critters as well as numerous imported guests, all of which have harbour views and a home that is an oasis of animal care and welfare.

However long you visit Sydney for, there is so much to experience. We can't blame you if, after just one taste of this fantastic city, you come back time and time again.

When the busy pace of Sydney gets too much, step inside the tranquil and impressive St Mary's Cathedral, located across from Hyde Park



Do you dare to climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge? Hook on your harness and allow guides to take your trip to new and exciting heights

92 ULURU

Discover Australia's iconic natural landmark in all its jaw-dropping glory

In the middle of a flat, dry desert stands something truly extraordinary. At 348 metres (1,141 feet) high, and rising 863 metres (2,831 feet) above sea level is Uluru, formerly known as Ayer's Rock. The natural formation is the only change in the surface level for miles around. With the nearest major town, Alice Springs, being a four-and-a-half-hour drive away, Uluru-Kata Tjuta Park, where Uluru sits, is totally peaceful; and as the scorching Australian sun hits it, the orange and scarlet sandstone seems to glow in the light. It's easy to see why it is considered a spiritual place for Australia's Aboriginal population.

But there's more to Uluru than just its appearance. Many people choose to walk around the base of it – that's a walk with a distance of 9.4 kilometres (5.8 miles), which involves tranquil waterholes and hidden caves that are just waiting to be peered into. It also provides the opportunity to discover some stunning Aboriginal rock art that's over 5,000 years old. Many of the routes are wheelchair-accessible, and if walking is not quite your style, there are companies offering tours on motorbikes and camels, so there's no excuse not to explore!

For the more adventurous, some companies offer skydiving experiences. Launching from the resort that's been built near Uluru, an adrenalin-pumping skydive with a qualified instructor gives breathtaking views of the desert, bush and, of course, Uluru itself. It's the perfect way to see Northern Territory's most famous landmark – from the view of a bird, you'll really appreciate the scale of it.

If what you're interested in is the local culture, there are plenty of ways to discover more about the Aboriginal way of life. As the oldest continual civilization on Earth, there's plenty to learn. From tours to an information centre, it's impossible not to come away knowing more about Anangu, the name given to the central Australian tribes.

Make sure you keep an eye out for the local wildlife, too. While you're most likely to see some of the 178 species of bird and 73 types of reptiles, see if you can spot any of the 21 different mammals and four types of frogs, too. Lizards and snakes are the most common, but kangaroos and dingos can be seen from time to time – you're in the Australian outback, after all.

After a long day trekking around the rock and checking out the local wildlife, why not spend the slightly cooler evening having a picnic in the park? As the sun sets over the sacred monolith, you will be treated to a magnificent view as the sky changes hue and turns Uluru into a silhouette against its backdrop. With such jaw-droppingly beautiful views, you will never want to go home!

Uluru stands tall as the highest point for miles around

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Climbing Uluru is heavily frowned upon because it is considered sacred by Aboriginal Australians.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September

TIME ZONE

UTC+9:30

CURRENCY
$
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

parksaustralia.gov.au/uluru
uluru-australia.com
northernterritory.com/gb/en/uluru-and-surrounds

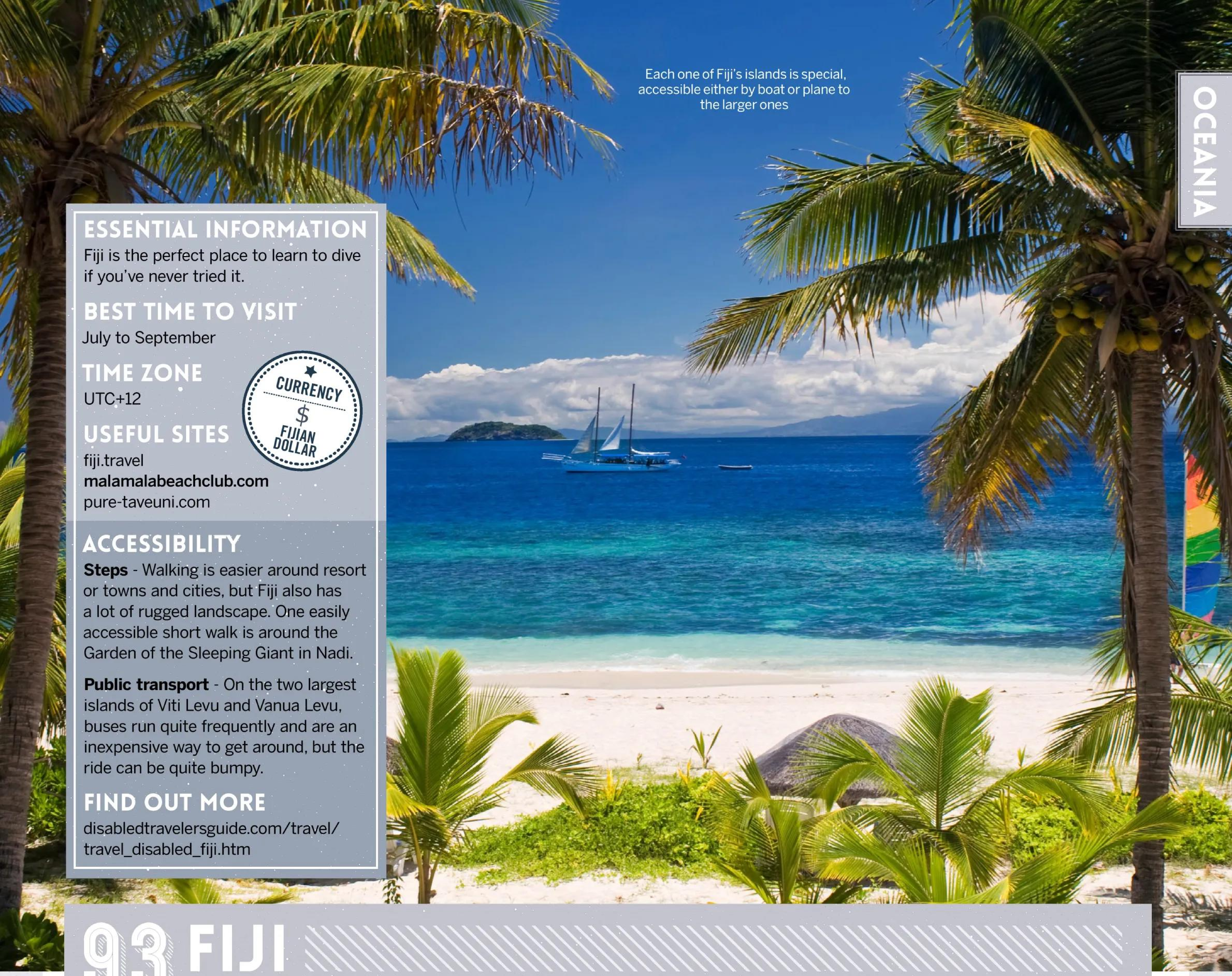
ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The walkway around Uluru's base is a flat, dirt track with some boardwalk sections. The base trek is around 10km (6mi) altogether, but you can always concentrate on a shorter section if preferred.

Public transport - Ayer's Rock Resort provides complimentary airport transfers and a free shuttle bus around the resort. Tours to Uluru itself will include return transport.

FIND OUT MORE

parksaustralia.gov.au/uluru/pub/visitor-guide.pdf



Each one of Fiji's islands is special, accessible either by boat or plane to the larger ones

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Fiji is the perfect place to learn to dive if you've never tried it.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July to September

TIME ZONE

UTC+12

CURRENCY

$ FIJIAN DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

fiji.travel
malamalabeachclub.com
pure-taveuni.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Walking is easier around resort or towns and cities, but Fiji also has a lot of rugged landscape. One easily accessible short walk is around the Garden of the Sleeping Giant in Nadi.

Public transport - On the two largest islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, buses run quite frequently and are an inexpensive way to get around, but the ride can be quite bumpy.

FIND OUT MORE

disabledtravelersguide.com/travel/travel_disabled_fiji.htm

93 FIJI

Island hop through this tropical paradise in the South Pacific Ocean

It's only when you step on a white sandy beach under a row of swaying palm trees, with warm clear water breaking quietly in the background, that you realise that all those postcard pictures of Fiji are true to life. Fiji is a tropical paradise that has a huge beach culture, catering for those looking for adventure as well as for those wanting to simply kick back and relax.

Fiji is comprised of hundreds of islands – 333 of them to be exact – with the two main islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, holding much of the country's population. The country's harbour capital, Suva, offers a place for travellers to replenish their backpacks and bodies before heading out for an island adventure.

The Fijian people are warm-hearted and friendly. Fiji is thought of as one of the happiest nations in the world, and the tight-knit communities and family-focused outlook make for a warm welcome wherever you go. The population is ethnically diverse, with native Fijians, Indo-Fijians and a whole host of other peoples making up the Fijian melting pot. Once you've adapted yourself to 'Fiji time', a concept that represents a laid-back approach to getting things done, life in Fiji becomes somewhat therapeutic and dreamy.

From the main airport in Nadi, catch a flight to Taveuni, the Garden Island, to find secluded sandy beaches, hidden waterfalls and incredible forests. The best way to explore beaches and islands is by kayak, and there are plenty of places offering them up for hire. It's entirely possible to paddle out and find empty islands to enjoy all to yourself. Taveuni has a meeting point where the international date line cuts through Fiji, separating today and yesterday. Hire a tent to camp out on a beach, and wake up to the waves breaking on the shore every morning.

For the more adventurous travellers, head out on an unforgettable snorkelling tour to get up-close and personal with sharks and other marine life in the clear waters off Fiji's Kuata Island. Alternatively, try your hand at underwater scootering, or dive down to a sunken wreck with certified divers taking the lead. Visit the beautiful Malamala Beach Club, located on its own island, to enjoy beachside cocktails and pristine waters to snorkel in. Islands such as Mana and Navini are the perfect locations to get away from it all, where you can stay for just one night before heading onto the next island.

When you're not bathing in the warm ocean waters, pay a visit to the multi-coloured Sri Siva Subramaniya Temple, a sacred Hindu site located in Nadi. It's well worth booking a tour to visit local villages and learn about the Fijian culture and way of life, and also about lovo – the way that food is prepared in banana leaves and then cooked over hot rocks underground. This is usually followed by a ceremony called meke, a tradition that encompasses storytelling through song and dance. Whether it's a relaxing cruise to numerous beaches, a scuba-diving experience or kayaking with friends across clear waters, Fiji is a place that definitely shouldn't get left out.

94 FIORDLAND NATIONAL PARK

The grandeur of nature is unsurpassed in dramatic Fiordland National Park

The poet Rudyard Kipling called Milford Sound the 'eighth wonder of the world', but this is only one of many natural wonders carved and crafted through the centuries at the Fiordland National Park, tucked along the southwest edge of New Zealand's South Island.

Established in 1952, Fiordland National Park is home to a number of spectacular vistas for visitors to enjoy. 12,607 square kilometres (4,868 square miles) are preserved, where mountains push skyward, deep and dark fjords have been etched by nature, and verdant valleys stretch far beyond the horizon. Nature's handiwork is on display in its grandest, most exhilarating fashion.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Fiordland National Park includes Milford, Dusky and Doubtful Sounds. It's also home to three of the world's most renowned hiking treks: the Kepler, Routeburn and Milford Track.

Milford Track is probably the most famous hiker's journey in New Zealand, traversing 53 kilometres (33 miles) through distant valleys and in the shadow of soaring mountains, beside crystal blue lakes and among ancient rainforests. It finishes at Sutherland Falls, the tallest waterfall in New Zealand and a wondrous sight to behold. Millennia ago, when glaciers crept across the land and created the finger-like fjords – actually flooded U-shaped valleys left by these rivers of ice – they also created other interesting formations. Visitors have been awe-struck with their splendour since indigenous peoples gathered there in ages past.

Today, visiting Fiordland National Park is a pilgrimage for lovers of natural beauty. Flights into the resort city of Queenstown are regular, and air services are available in Te Anau, the gateway to the park, Manapouri and Milford Sound. The two-hour drive from Queenstown to Te Anau is around 172 kilometres (107 miles). Car rentals are easy to find in Queenstown, and scenic drives enable motorists to view points of interest. Fiordland National Park may also be experienced via boat tour or chartered aircraft, offering different perspectives on the dark cliffs rising directly from the depths of the lakes.

Visits to Fiordland National Park should begin at the official Department of Conservation Visitor Centre, where reservations for hotels, tours etc. can be made, and action-packed itineraries planned. Rare species of plants and animals reside within the park, and the Te Anau Bird Sanctuary is a favourite for those wishing to catch a glimpse of the beautiful Fiordland Crested Pengui (or tawaki) or the Kaka. The etched limestone caverns of Glowworm Caves reward adventurers with a spectacular subterranean waterfall. Fishermen angle for brown and rainbow trout in the Waiau River, along with cod, tuna and other saltwater species along the shoreline.

Milford and Doubtful Sounds exhibit their own charms, including the sheer cliffs, roaring waterfalls and occasional visits of inquisitive bottlenose dolphins. Lake Manapouri is the second deepest freshwater lake in New Zealand, offering visitors a perfect opportunity for a boat cruise or kayak paddling.

Only 20 minutes' drive from Te Anau, the village of Manapouri lies adjacent to the shimmering lake that shares its name. Both towns have resorts, economically priced rooms and other lodgings. Restaurants and picnic areas provide diverse dining options, and popular local foods include lobster and venison.

This stunning perspective of Milford Sound is just a sampling of the wonders of Fiordland National Park in New Zealand

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

The climate in Fiordland is generally moderate, but weather can change rapidly. Be prepared for all possibilities.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

September to November

TIME ZONE

UTC+12

CURRENCY
$
NEW ZEALAND DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

fiordland.org.nz
doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/places-to-go/fiordland/places/fiordland-national-park

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Many routes, particularly around Milford Sound and Te Anau, are flat. They also host wheelchair-friendly hiking routes.

Public transport - Recommended travel is by car, but there are buses that go between Queenstown Airport, Invercagill, Dunedin and more.

FIND OUT MORE

https://bit.ly/35zxqwy

Roughly 95 per cent of the island's moai statues were quarried and carved at Rano Raraku

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

When flying to Easter Island, book a window seat on the left side of the plane for best views.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Early February (for the Tapati Rapa Nui festival)

TIME ZONE

UTC-6

CURRENCY

$

CHILEAN PESO

USEFUL SITES

chile.travel/en

gitourseasterisland.com/en

easterislandspirit.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Some Rapa Nui sites are a long walk over rough terrain, but certain moai statues lie closer to the start point. Steps are a common feature in shop and restaurant entrances.

Public transport - Hiking, cycling and quad-bikes are good fun, but rental cars and taxis are available. A bus runs from Hanga Roa to Anakena beach.

FIND OUT MORE

wheelchairtraveling.com/easter-island-wheelchair-travel-adventure

95 EASTER ISLAND

In the middle of nowhere, Easter Island begs more questions than it answers

Around 1,000 years ago, Polynesian settlers landed at an untouched island thousands of miles from the nearest continent, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. They considered it so distant, they named it 'Te Pito o te Henua' or 'the navel of the world'.

On the island they found a number of dormant volcanoes, relics of the violent eruptions that formed the isle thousands of years earlier. At the southern tip was Rano Kau, whose crater now comprised a lake. Settlers climbed 150 metres (492 feet) down to the grass-covered water, which they believed led all the way to the centre of the earth. When you visit, you'll understand why.

As agriculture thrived, the island's population blossomed. Somewhere between 1400 and 1650 CE, the society began a remarkable tradition: building increasingly large statues to honour the dead. They called these moai – which means 'to exist' – crafting them from tuff, or compressed volcanic ash, mostly quarried from the volcano Rano Raraku. The islanders would carve the statues at the volcano site, using hard rock, and then somehow transport them across the island.

Today, Easter Island, known locally as Rapa Nui, boasts 1,000 statues, weighing up to 86 tonnes (189,500 pounds) and stretching ten metres (33 feet) tall. They serve as majestic landmarks, scattered amid the island's grasslands, volcanoes and beaches.

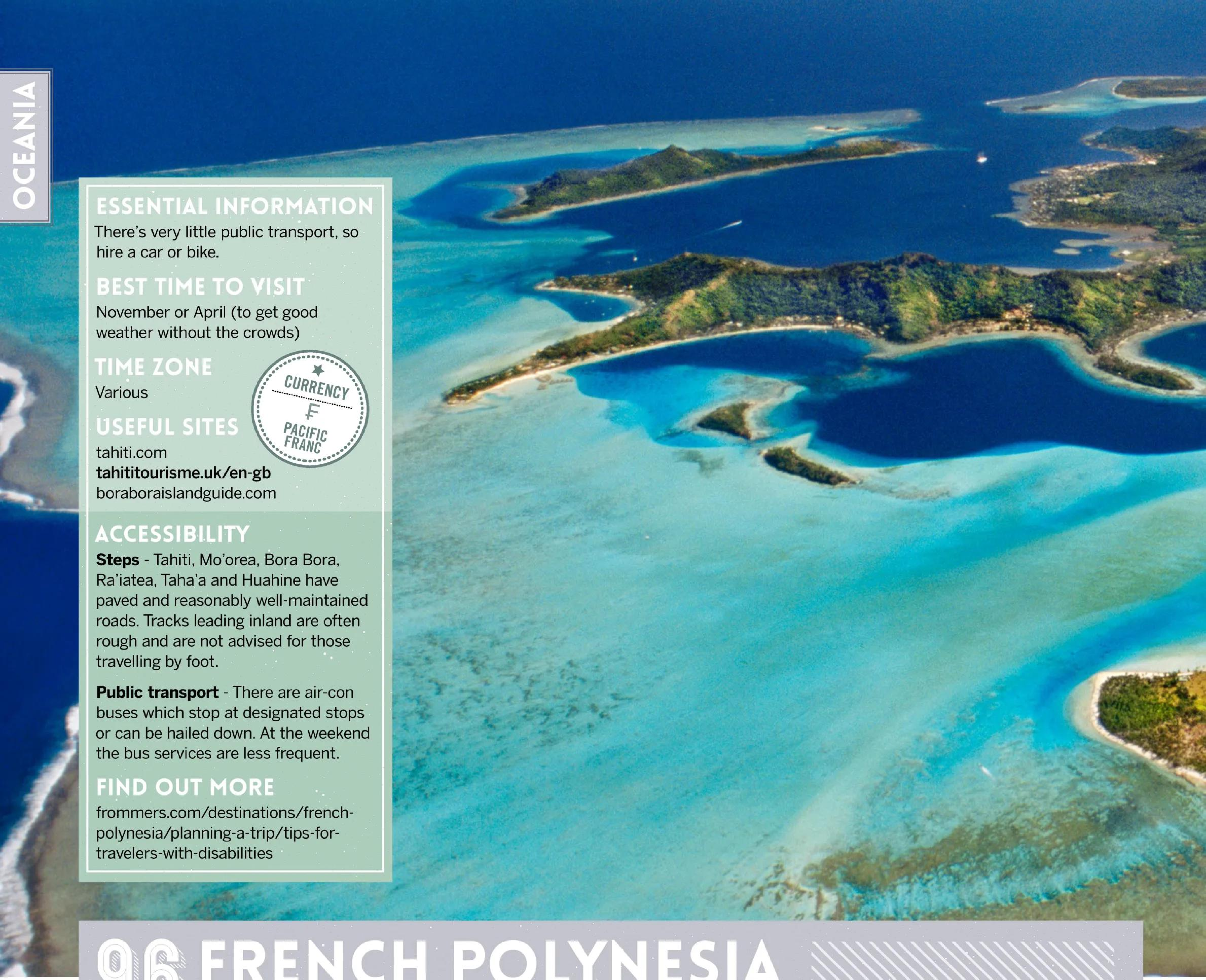
The hiking trail from Hanga Roa passes the sinister volcanic Ana Kai Tangata cave, softened with red, white and black cave paintings – depicting manutara birds, the symbol of the island's Tangata Manu, or bird-man, cult. Continuing on, the route takes trekkers up the island's infamous Rano Kau volcano, home to the ceremonial village of Orongo – which served as a base for the annual bird-man competition, where competitors hurled their bodies down cliffs, swimming past sea turtles and collecting eggs from a nearby islet.

Roughly 150 metres (492 feet) inland from the white sandy beach of Anakena, nestled among the palms, seven moai mark the legendary site believed to be the island's birthplace, their heads adorned with topknots – a tribute to the local belief that hair holds special powers, which is why high-ranking men would wear their hair long.

How the Polynesian tribesmen were able to move such enormous statues has long been a mystery. While some have speculated they were teleported by aliens, they were most likely rolled atop tree trunks. Unfortunately, overpopulation led to mass deforestation, in turn leaving the islanders without a means of transporting their beloved moai. As a result, almost half of the island's statues sit unfinished at the Rano Raraku volcano quarry site.

Wandering among the megaliths, some buried up to their necks, others still stood within the crater, is a truly surreal experience. Examining their distinctive features in silence, you are simultaneously connected to the lost civilisation, while made intimately aware of its downfall.

On the east coast, just below the oldest of its three main volcanoes, Poike, is Ahu Tongariki, the largest cluster of moai – 15 statues sitting on a stone platform, which cleverly aligns with the sun during the summer solstice. Inland, Ahu Huri a Urenga features a single moai with four hands – kept company by horses chewing on grass and cawing seagulls – which doubles as an observatory, beautifully marking the winter solstice sunrise.



ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

There's very little public transport, so hire a car or bike.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November or April (to get good weather without the crowds)

TIME ZONE

Various

CURRENCY

₣ PACIFIC FRANC

USEFUL SITES

tahiti.com
tahititourisme.uk/en-gb
boraboraislandguide.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Tahiti, Mo'orea, Bora Bora, Ra'iatea, Taha'a and Huahine have paved and reasonably well-maintained roads. Tracks leading inland are often rough and are not advised for those travelling by foot.

Public transport - There are air-con buses which stop at designated stops or can be hailed down. At the weekend the bus services are less frequent.

FIND OUT MORE

frommers.com/destinations/french-polynesia/planning-a-trip/tips-for-travelers-with-disabilities

96

FRENCH POLYNESIA

Thousands of miles from land, French Polynesia is a perfect Pacific retreat

Picture paradise – you know what it looks like. Quiet, white-sand beaches with coconut palms lazily draping over the sands, their leaves pointing towards crystal-clear, turquoise waters. It might be a cliché, but you know you'd go there in a heartbeat.

To reach magical places like this, many holidaymakers head for Hawaii, the Caribbean, or perhaps the islands of South East Asia. Unsurprisingly, not many people think of France – but their overseas territory of French Polynesia is one of the most stunning places on Earth. Home to six archipelagos, including the incredible islands of Bora Bora, Tahiti and the relatively unspoilt Marquesas Islands, you'll find beauty everywhere you look. From jaw-dropping waterfalls to densely rainforested mountains, island-hopping throughout French Polynesia is something every traveller should try out on an adventure across the Pacific.

Originally colonised by great Polynesian explorers, it's thought that these islands were some of the last places on the planet to be settled by humans. When Polynesian settlers came to the area, they built highly advanced and interconnected societies on the islands. These survived for more than a thousand years, and when Spanish, French, Portuguese and British sailors came through the area, they took note of what they found. But that didn't stop Europeans from trying to enforce Christianity on the population, so conflict between the Europeans and native Polynesians broke out.

French missionaries were particularly prevalent, and in one skirmish in 1838, the French government sent a warship to protect its citizens. This was the start of a long and protracted war between the two peoples, with France ultimately winning out and officially taking over the area in 1889.

Although French Polynesia's faraway nature is certainly a large part of its charm, it does mean that it will take you a fair amount of time (and money) to get there. From Europe, the most common routes go via Los Angeles, and will take more than 24 hours in travel time. You'll fly into Pape'ete, on Tahiti, as it is the only international airport in the country. Make sure you do your research to see if you can find cheaper deals flying via anywhere else, such as New Zealand.

With a wealth of islands to explore, you'll want to plan your trip carefully, so you can make the most of all the area has to offer. The most easily accessible islands from outside are the Society Islands, and they're also the ones that cater best to travellers, as the major destinations of Tahiti and Bora Bora form part of this group.

But even beyond those two treasures, the Society Islands are a real jewel. Most of the islands here have small airports, making island-

French Polynesia has hundreds of islands and atolls, many of which feature awesome scenery and incredible snorkelling

ISLAND HOPPING IS SOMETHING EVERY TRAVELLER SHOULD TRY OUT

hopping quick and simple, but you can look into doing it the old fashioned way and take ferry boats between them. From Tahiti, Mo'orea is the easiest island to reach by boat, with journeys taking between half an hour to an hour. You'll still find those trademark Tahitian bungalows sitting above shallow, blue lagoons there, but head inland a little to explore the striking green mountains that poke up against the skyline.

If being surrounded by nature is your idea of heaven, go to the little island of Huahine. As well as abundant fruit plants, such as watermelon, breadfruit, coconut, banana and even vanilla, you'll find beautiful white tiaré flowers growing free. The wildlife here is second to none – if you want to see a rainbow of fish and corals, don your snorkel mask on and dive into the lagoon.

The Marquesas Islands also have a wide variety of things to see and do, but you'll have to be quite intrepid to go there. 3,000 miles away from the nearest land mass – Mexico – it's quite the unspoilt paradise. These volcanic islands feature some of the most spectacular scenery in the entire world, including the Vaipo waterfall on Nuku Hiva, with a sheer 350-metre (1,148-foot) drop – making it one of the tallest waterfalls in the world. It's also home to one of the richest cultures in the entire area, so if you're keen to learn more about this ancient civilisation, be sure to chat to one of the locals. Ask them about traditional Polynesian dances – it's so much more than hula skirts and lei garlands.

The other island groups are far less accessible, and their tourism potential hasn't been seriously delved into yet. The Gambier Islands, despite their appearance of perfect peace, were once used as a nuclear testing ground for French atomic weapons. Although their use has been banned since the end of the Cold War, the residents complain about the impact fallout is still having. But if you're drawn to adventure, the Gambier's main island of Mangareva might appeal – you can fly there from Tahiti, but other international visitors would be a rare sight indeed on the island.

Known for beautiful beaches and friendly locals, French Polynesia earns its spot on your (very long) list of places to go. If you give it a chance, we're sure it will win your heart, too.

BORA BORA

It's been in countless movies, and graced many a computer screensaver, so we're sure you've seen it before. Bora Bora is the iconic mountain island, surrounded by a gorgeous lagoon and bordered by a fantastic reef.

Known for its luxury hotels, Bora Bora is definitely one of the most expensive islands to visit, but it's perfect for honeymooners looking to splash out on the trip of a lifetime. There's a plethora of accommodation options, but the most iconic are the over-water bungalows, which start from around £500/$650 per night if you're looking at one of the major international chains.

As well as being romantic, Bora Bora is an extremely fun place to be, so get out there and enjoy some snorkelling and scuba diving in the lagoon. Alternatively, pump up your adrenaline by trying out something a little more exhilarating, such as water sports, or hiring a speedboat – which you can drive around all by yourself.

97 ROTORUA

New Zealand is both stunning and unusual. Rotorua is a great example of why

A land of mountains and geothermal activity, Rotorua is not exactly love at first sniff. The town's lingering eggy, sulphuric and humid air is perhaps the first thing visitors notice when approaching it. However, the source of this smell is far too remarkable to turn one's nose up at.

In the heart of the city, an innocuous weekly market hawks fresh fruit, crafts, clothing, souvenirs and other interesting goods, but Kuirau is not your average park. Bubbling and hissing, it hints at a great, unstoppable menace below. According to Maori legend, the gods first heated up the park's small lake to punish a water-dwelling taniwha (monster) for kidnapping a young woman.

Just three kilometres (1.9 miles) away, at Whakarewarewa, 500 hot springs and 65 geyser vents surround what was once the unconquered fortress of Te Puia, founded in 1325 CE. The local Maori who inhabit this 'living village' continue to rely upon the traditional, eco-friendly geothermal energy source for heating and cooking. Today, visitors can learn more about Maori culture, music and food, cooked over hot stones, just by the country's largest geyser. Erupting 15 times a day, Pohutu blasts boiling hot water 30 metres (100 feet) high – fitting for a geyser whose name literally means 'big splash'.

The only Maori-owned thermal park, Tikitere, or 'Hell's Gate', has remained holy ground to the Ngati Rangiteaorere tribe. It is Rotorua's most energetic landscape, 20 hectares (50 acres) marked by spitting mud pits, angry geysers, steaming hot springs and the southern hemisphere's largest hot waterfall, the terrifyingly destructive Kakahi.

The black pool is a nightmarish pond, ever set to 93 degrees Celsius (199 degrees Fahrenheit) – so hot, it's used to cook food. Elsewhere, colourful bacteria known as 'land corals' sprout upon the alien landscape, flourishing from its unusual conditions. Though even in hell, there is paradise, in the form of the Wai Ora and Hell's Gate spas, a tantalising set of mud baths and hot springs, simmering with replenishing nutrients for your skin to soak up.

Another park, Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland, is a brightly coloured spectacle, where hot springs peacock in various shades of orange, yellow, turquoise and emerald. Not content to choose just one, the Champagne Pool rings its green centre with a skirting of orange. The park's Lady Knox Geyser is set off every morning with a curious trick, discovered by a chain gang in the 1900s: pouring soap into its spout.

Elsewhere, in the Hidden Valley, lies one of the world's only two geothermal caves, Ruatapu, or 'Sacred Hole'. This awesome cave drives 37 metres (120 feet) underground, straight into a hot blue pool named Waiwhakaata, translated to 'pool of mirrors'.

Four of Rotorua's geothermal parks lie on the Te Ara Ahi cycling trail, its off-road sections a pleasant ride even for casual riders. Eager bunnies can even whisk themselves through Redwoods Mountain Park, a 5,600-hectare (13,838-acre) forest. Here, unusual vegetation blooms alongside volcanic craters and steaming rainbow-coloured rocks.

For something a little different, at Waitomo Caves boats drift into the darkness, illuminated by the soft light of glow-worms. A more exciting alternative is to abseil down into the caves, throttling through via zipline, and leaping off underground waterfalls.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Rotorua is perhaps the place to immerse yourself in Maori culture.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May (to avoid the crowds and winter)

TIME ZONE

UTC+12

CURRENCY
$
NEW ZEALAND DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

waitomo.com
newzealand.com
waiotapu.co.nz

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - There are a range of walks you can do in and around the city. Some short but fascinating walks are around Kuirau Park, which is free to enter, or towards Redwoods Treewalk.

Public transport - Getting around Rotorua is easy, with several bus and train services, as well as taxis. There are also coaches linking it with other North Island destinations.

FIND OUT MORE

rotoruanz.com/travel-trade/trade-toolkit/about-rotorua

Rotorua's pungent hot springs come in a wide variety of colours, such as the Champagne Pool at Wai-O-Tapu

Piscine
Naturel

L'Île-des-Pins features a gorgeous natural swimming pool

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

It's a two-hour flight from Brisbane and Fiji, or three from Auckland.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to April for hot weather, May to September for cooler weather.

TIME ZONE

UTC+11

CURRENCY

₣ PACIFIC FRANC

USEFUL SITES

newcaledonia.travel/en
visitnewcaledonia.com
wikitravel.org/en/New_Caledonia

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Take your time navigating the island – there's no rush. Nouméa has a decent pedestrian infrastructure, but some of the rural areas may be badly maintained.

Public transport - There are local buses that you can catch to get yourself around, as well as organised tour trips to take you further afield, plus handy water taxis.

FIND OUT MORE

iexplore.com/articles/travel-guides/australia-and-south-pacific/new-caledonia/transportation

98 NEW CALEDONIA

Enjoy a French way of living in a stunning tropical setting

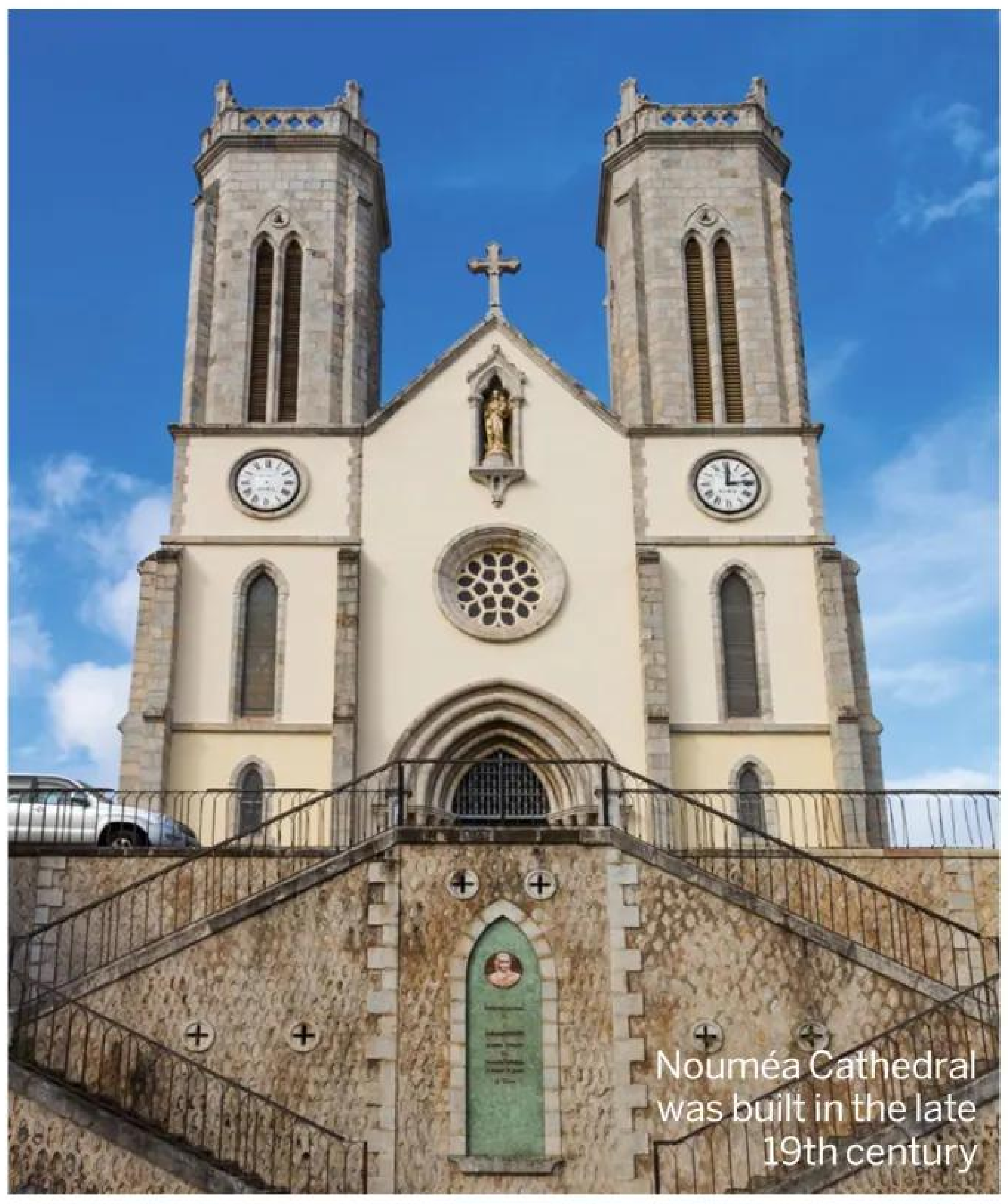
For a Pacific holiday with a difference head to New Caledonia, with friendly locals that speak French and stunning tropical surroundings. Culturally the island feels very French, but the capital, Nouméa, is rather cosmopolitan. Here you can find fine-dining, amazing shops and fantastic natural beauty spots that include a World Heritage Site lagoon, lush river valleys, white sandy beaches, cool rainforests and tumbling waterfalls.

At breakfast time, take a stroll around the Port Moselle markets, which are on daily except for Mondays, where you will find Kanak women selling fresh pineapple, papaya and passion fruits. Complete your petit déjeuner by visiting the French sellers, who offer buttery croissants and fresh coffee. Pick up some fish for later from their fresh seafood stalls.

Restaurant Le 1881 is a must-visit in New Caledonia. It is a beach restaurant with a rich history because it is located in the grounds of the former penal colony on the island, which dates back to the late 19th century. It's one of Nouméa's most exciting restaurants, with a previous Michelin-star chef in the kitchen.

Head to the island heart of Nouméa and explore Place des Cocotiers for a lovely afternoon, where you can watch the world go by. With botanical gardens, a pétanque pitch and a giant chessboard as well as frequent markets and concerts to enjoy, you'll be able to while away the hours with ease.

Other sights to visit include the Heart of Voh, a mangrove swamp that has developed some unusual natural designs – including, of course, a heart. You can also opt to explore Fort Teremba, Le Parc des Grandes Fougères and Anse Vata. Catch a boat to L'Île-des-Pins, a turquoise atoll filled with verdant conifer trees – you can swim in a unique natural aquarium there.



Nouméa Cathedral was built in the late 19th century

99 FRASER ISLAND

Set alongside Australia's Queensland coast is a wild island, fierce in nature

Part of the Great Sandy National Park, Fraser Island is home to the world's oldest dunes. However, this is no typical subtropical paradise. Stretching 123 kilometres (76 miles) long and 22 kilometres (14 miles) wide, at 184,000 hectares (454,674 acres), Fraser Island is the largest sand island in the world. More than that, dressed in luscious layers of foliage, the UNESCO World Heritage Site is the planet's only sand island to boast a rainforest. It is an island in motion, an ever-evolving snapshot of nature at its most innovative and raw.

Fraser Island sits along the Fraser Coast, 300 kilometres (186 miles) north of Brisbane. While road-trippers board the Manta Ray Barge from Inskip Point, ramblers often prefer to take the leisurely 50-minute Fraser Island Barge, from River Heads, 20 minutes south of Hervey Bay. Daring souls may opt for the scenic, albeit tiny, Air Fraser Island plane.

No matter how it is reached, a good starting point is to stock up on supplies at the settlements of Eurong, Happy Valley, Cathedrals or Orchid Beach – though visitors are advised to bring medical kits and water with them.

From here, Fraser Island, known by its aboriginal name of K'gari, is best enjoyed aboard a four-wheel drive (or 4WD), throttling along its 250-kilometre (155-mile) shoreline, rocky roads and looming rainforests. However, the island's great lure is as a socket to connect to nature – and it could be argued that the only way to truly do so is the 90-kilometre (56-mile), six-day Fraser Island Great Walk, from the northeastern Happy Valley to the southeastern Dilli Village – with plenty of camping breaks along the way. For casual walkers, the journey can also be enjoyed in chunks – ranging from a few hours to an overnight trek.

Along the way, the island unveils its hidden gems, not so much diamonds in the rough, as perpetual masterpieces, forever in perfection. The island's most immediately staggering feature is its rainforest. Across Pile Valley, which has survived some serious deforestation, giant satinay trees stretch straight towards the clear blue sky, alongside the brush box, spreading outwards like bursts of green clouds. They are joined by thin piccabeen palms with outstretched feathery fronds, and cherry satinash, sprouting a popular 'bush food', along with the resilient blush satinash, abloom with fluffy, white flowers. Elsewhere, Wanggoolba Creek is shaded beneath a walkway of rare king ferns, holding their leaning fronds up using water pressure.

Behind the northeastern lookout of Waddy Point, the subtropical rainforest is characterised by the scribbly gum – a light-coloured eucalyptus tree, with dark scribbles drawn up by the scribbly moth's larvae. These are kept company by the red bloodwood, an evergreen reaching heights of 35 metres (115 feet), oozing with an essential oil much-coveted in aboriginal herbal medicine. While Fraser Island's choppy seas are considered unsafe for swimming, the nearby Champagne Pools create a natural set of swimming holes along the shoreline. Looking east towards the Coral Sea, it is the only place one can enjoy the island's saltwater – especially during low-tide, when the pools are lapped only by soft waves, hauling in the occasional fish.

One of the island's more curious wonders is its 40 kilometres (25 miles) of coloured sandy cliffs. Known as The Pinnacles, they are believed by the indigenous Butchulla people to have been created by the Rainbow Serpent.

Fraser Island, the world's only sand island to host a rainforest, is characterised by towering satinay, brush box and other sub-tropical trees

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

If you encounter a wild dingo, keep still and cross your arms over your chest. Then, while facing the dingo, slowly walk backwards.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

July to November (for whale watching – August to October for humpbacks)

TIME ZONE

UTC+10

USEFUL SITES

kingfisherbay.com
visitfrasercoast.com
fraserisland.net

CURRENCY
$
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - The island is mostly sand with some hills inland. It is not particularly well suited to wheelchair users or those who struggle to walk on sand.

Public transport - Fraser Island can be reached by ferry or plane. Four-wheel drive tours may be suitable for those who are unable to walk long distances.

FIND OUT MORE

parks.des.qld.gov.au/parks/fraser/about.html

Used as a hospital ship in WWI, the SS Maheno was swept towards Fraser Island, en route to Japan for scrapping

Every year, humpback whales migrate from Antarctica to the eastern Australian coast to give birth

Heading south towards Eli Creek, 72 shades of sand dance from red to yellow, ushering in the wreck of the SS Maheno – an early turbine-driven steamer, which was swept away in 1935 while being dragged to Japan. It is just one of 23 ships to have been wrecked against Fraser Island between 1856 and 1935 – even after the construction of the island's northern Sandy Cape Lighthouse in 1870.

Further afield, Hammerstone Sandblow, one of the island's enormous, ever-shifting dunes, leads into Lake Wabby. The island's deepest lake is also an anomaly – both technically a window lake, which sits beneath water level, and a barrage lake – formed when the Hammerstone created a natural dam against a creek. It is also the island's only lake that supports aquatic life, but in the next century will most likely be swallowed by the dune that created it.

The island's lakes are exceptional in size, diversity and age. Inland, Fraser's Lake McKenzie splits the rainforest, like an enormous oasis. The perched lake is fed not by groundwater but rainwater, sitting between dunes, atop the silky smooth white sand below – which not only filters the water crystal clear, but feels positively delightful beneath your feet.

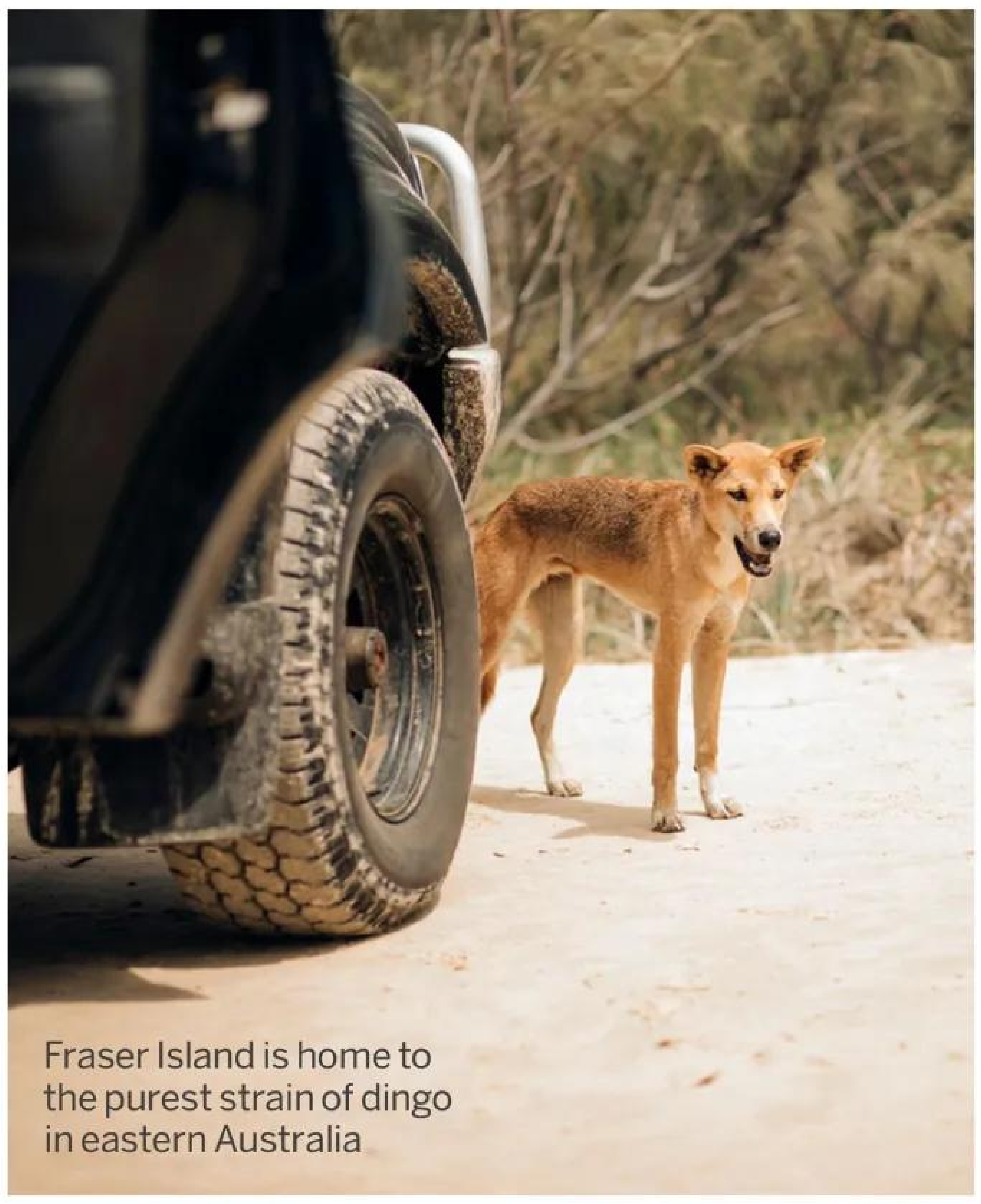
Lake Boomanjin is also a bizarre beast. Quieter than its counterparts, at 190 hectares (470 acres), it is both the world's largest perched lake, and the highest, 130 metres (427 feet) above sea level. Boomanjin also boasts a surreal gradient of reddish hues – tea tree red, to be precise – an effect created by stripping tannin from the surrounding tea trees.

The island possesses unfamiliar ecosystem, where the purest strain of eastern Australian dingoes call home. Roughly 50 mammals are spread across Fraser Island's rainforests, mangroves, swamps, woodlands, heaths and shorelines. They include the elusive swamp wallaby, which scurries amid the grass, and the shy short-beaked echidna, with its long spines.

THE ISLAND'S MOST IMMEDIATELY STAGGERING FEATURE IS ITS RAINFOREST

Come evening, visitors can go on an open-air tour of the island's all-night party critters, such as the black-and-white sugar glider, a tiny possum capable of crossing half a football pitch in one flight. The island also counts around 80 types of reptile among its population, including 20 species of snake, 'acid frogs' accustomed to acidic water, and sand and lace monitors, which tend to linger around picnic areas.

Aside from hundreds of bird species, the island is perfectly positioned for whale-watching excursions, as migrating humpbacks flee the Antarctic to give birth in Australia's warmer waters. The only sight more delightful than humpback whales are humpback whales swimming alongside their calves – a shining example of life at the edge of the world.



Fraser Island is home to the purest strain of dingo in eastern Australia

The self-contained Kingfisher Bay Resort is tucked away on a stunning stretch of shoreline

ACCOMMODATION

There is no one way to experience Fraser Island. The isle offers myriad options to rest your head, from camping beneath the stars to living it up at the Kingfisher Bay Resort. For backpackers and four-wheelers, campgrounds are scattered across the island – though not all of these allow campers to light fires, so packing a portable stove is a must. Luckily, from crockery to sleeping bags, essentials can be hired along with a 4WD. Camping packages even include the cost of permits.

While there are hotels available in Eurong and Happy Valley, none quite match up to Kingfisher Bay Resort, an ecotourist slice of paradise, offering everything from rooms to villas, with views of the sea and lagoons. Meanwhile, the timber Wilderness Lodges embed guests in the shade of gum trees and bush plants. Shared bedrooms strip back the frills, limited to an open-lounge, coin-laundry, pay-phone, kitchenette and a mask of mosquito screens.

100 AUCKLAND

New Zealand's biggest city is ready to welcome you with open arms

Start your New Zealand journey with Auckland, and take a trip to the unmissable item on every itinerary: the Sky Tower. It's New Zealand's tallest building and offers unparalleled aerial views of the entire city. Thrill-seekers can bungee jump off the top of the tower, but for those who prefer to keep their feet firmly on the ground, you can relax with a coffee or glass of wine at one of the Sky Tower's restaurants.

Also in downtown Auckland, and just a stone's throw away from the Sky Tower, is The Civic. It's one of a few late-1920s 'atmospheric' theatres left in the world, and it's a great place to catch some musical theatre, a concert, and even comedy shows.

If you're looking for a day trip, visiting Waiheke Island is a must. Hop on a ferry from the central city wharf and 40 minutes later you'll find yourself in a different, more tranquil world. Hire a bike and cycle around the island, or lace up your boots and explore one of the walking tracks. Waiheke Island is also home to over 20 vineyards, so you can book a wine tour and find out for yourself why New Zealanders love their wine.

When you're back on the mainland, head to the Viaduct. Here you can find some of Auckland's finest dining, with stunning views looking towards the harbour.

If you prefer a more casual setting, don't be afraid to go off the beaten track – some of the best cafes and restaurants in town can be found in side streets and alleys. Always order a flat white coffee, and you'll never go wrong.

New Zealand has no shortage of beaches, and you'll find lots of seaside spots around Auckland

The Sky Tower is the tallest building in New Zealand, and a must-see for anyone visiting

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Auckland is on North Island, and it's just a three-hour flight from Sydney.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

October to April

TIME ZONE

UTC+12

CURRENCY
$
NZ DOLLARS (NZD)

USEFUL SITES

aucklandnz.com/visit
newzealand.com/int/auckland
aucklandlive.co.nz

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Many of Auckland's top sites are within walking distance of one another. If you've done enough walking, there are hop-on hop-off buses running regularly.

Public transport - It's easy getting into downtown Auckland from the airport, with direct buses running at all hours of the day.

FIND OUT MORE

at.govt.nz

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Those travelling to Fremantle via ferry should secure seats on the right-hand side of the boat for unbeatable views.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

March to May for good weather and fewer crowds.

TIME ZONE

UTC+8

CURRENCY
$
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

USEFUL SITES

australia.com
westernaustralia.com
visitperth.com

ACCESSIBILITY

Steps - Accessibility in Perth is excellent and most attractions can be reached via road. In addition, many tourist sites provide access for those with limited mobility.

Public transport - Perth boasts an expansive and well-integrated public transport system, which includes buses, ferries and trains.

FIND OUT MORE

accesswa.com

101 PERTH

Perth dishes up a feast of natural beauty and fascinating heritage

Isolated in the badlands of Western Australia, laid-back Perth emerges under a cloudless blue sky. Blessed with sweeping beaches, cultural credentials and Michelin-star restaurants, the flourishing west coast capital is an oceanfront paradise with big-city attitude.

One of the largest inner-city parks on the planet, Kings Park and Botanic Garden is home to native bushland and white-trunked trees that erupt from manicured lawns like skyscrapers. The 750-year-old boab and canopy tree bridge are not to be missed. Come September the park bursts into colour as bright wildflowers take over as part of a month-long festival.

West of the city, the freewheeling port town of Fremantle beckons. Reached via boat, the scenic journey sees the city skyline give way to sprawling mansions, while dolphins make an appearance. With its serpentine streets, historic architecture and artisanal stalls, Fremantle is a patchwork of colour and life where history buffs can chase the Convicts and Colonials Trail, taking in the UNESCO-listed prison.

With beaches aplenty, Perth's pine tree-fringed Cottesloe remains a crowd-pleaser. However, those in search of solitude flee to Mosman or Swanbourne. Inland, Cathedral Square houses the City of Perth Library, St George's Cathedral and the 19th-century Treasury Buildings in addition to a slew of stylish bars and restaurants, including the subterranean velvet-clad Halford Bar and Wildflower, which showcases seasonal, indigenous flavours. While the culturally curious head to Perth Cultural Centre, a vibrant hub of museums, galleries and theatres, a slower pace can be found in Swan Valley, dotted with rolling vineyards and chocolatiers.

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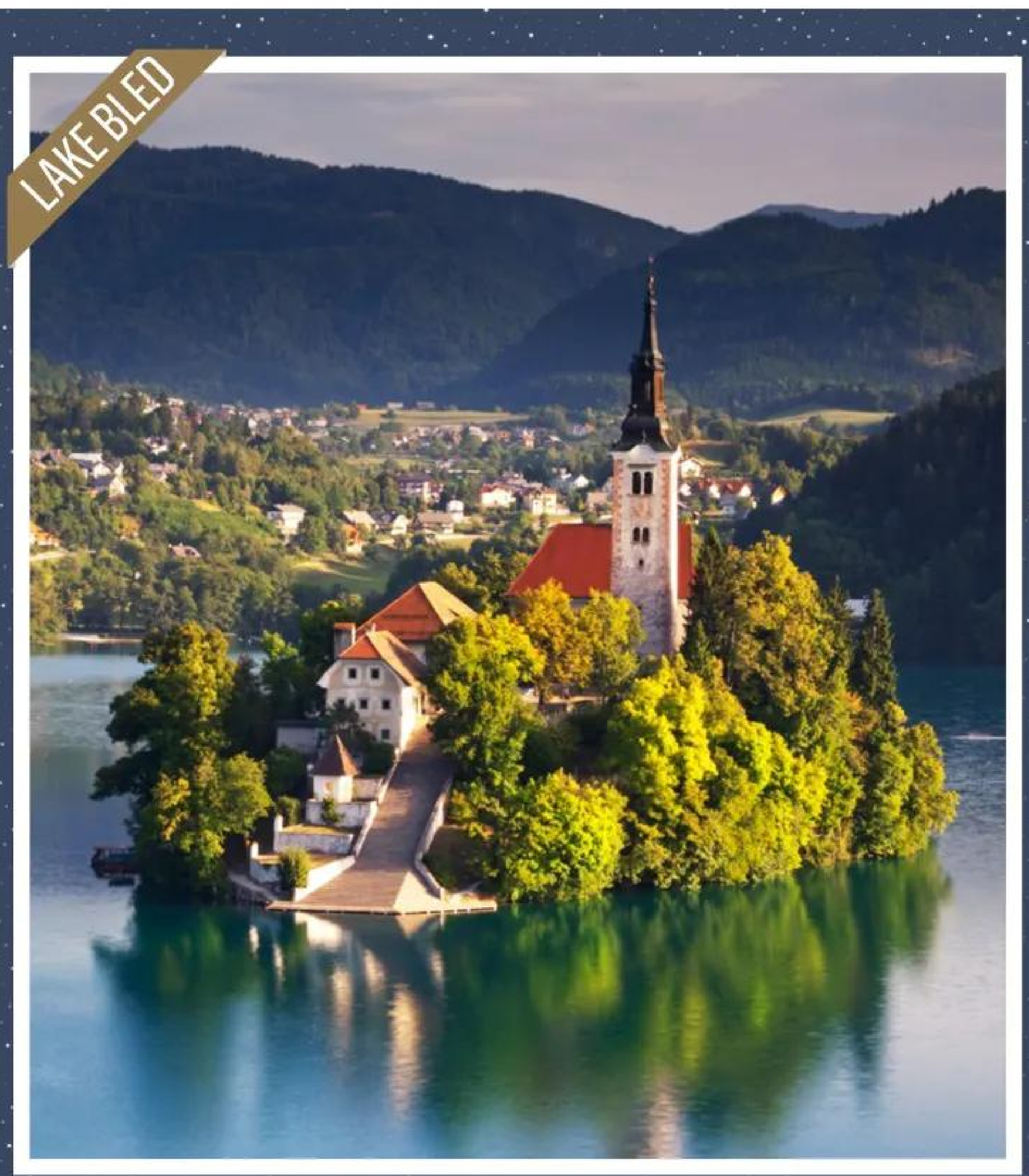
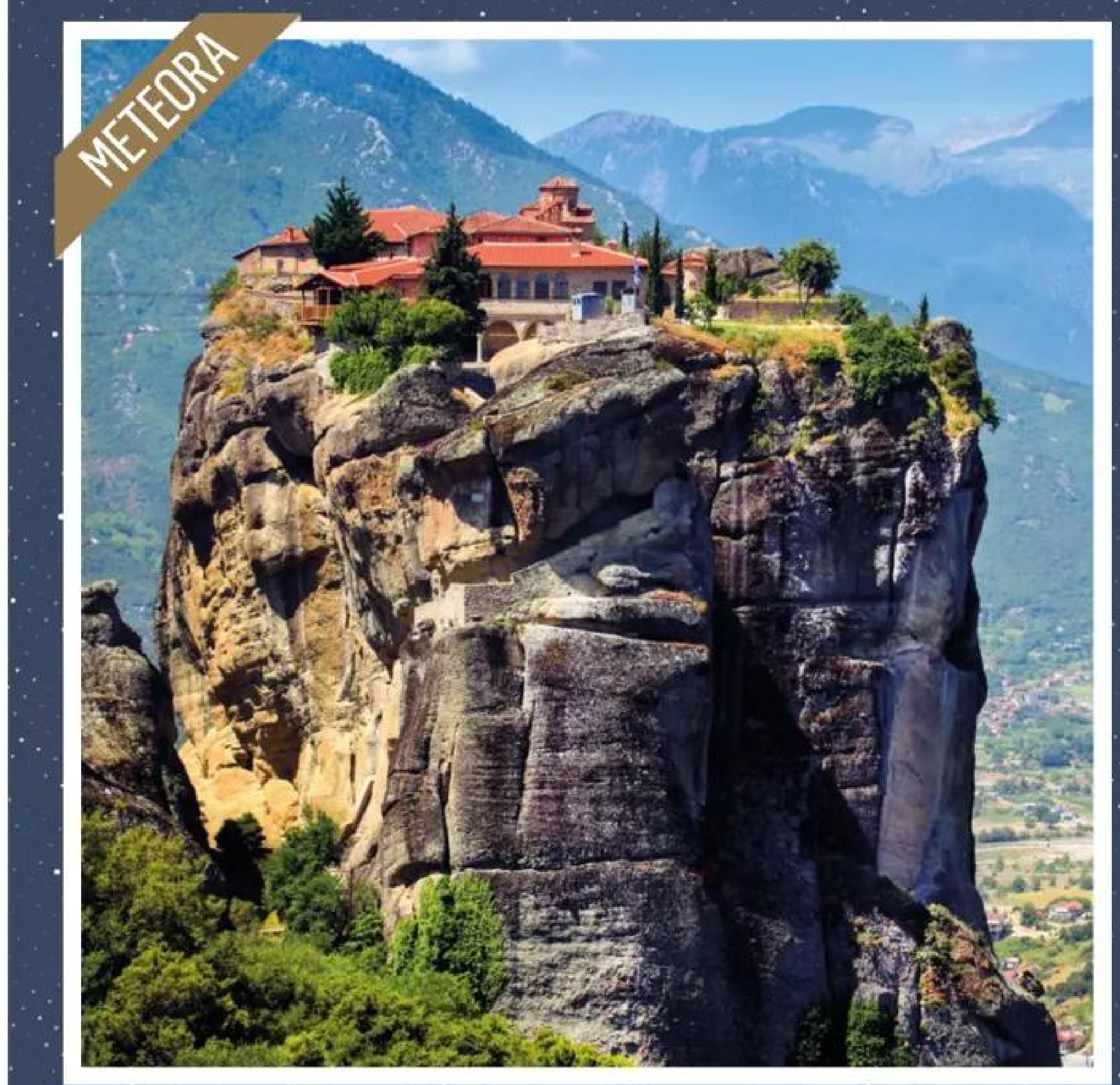
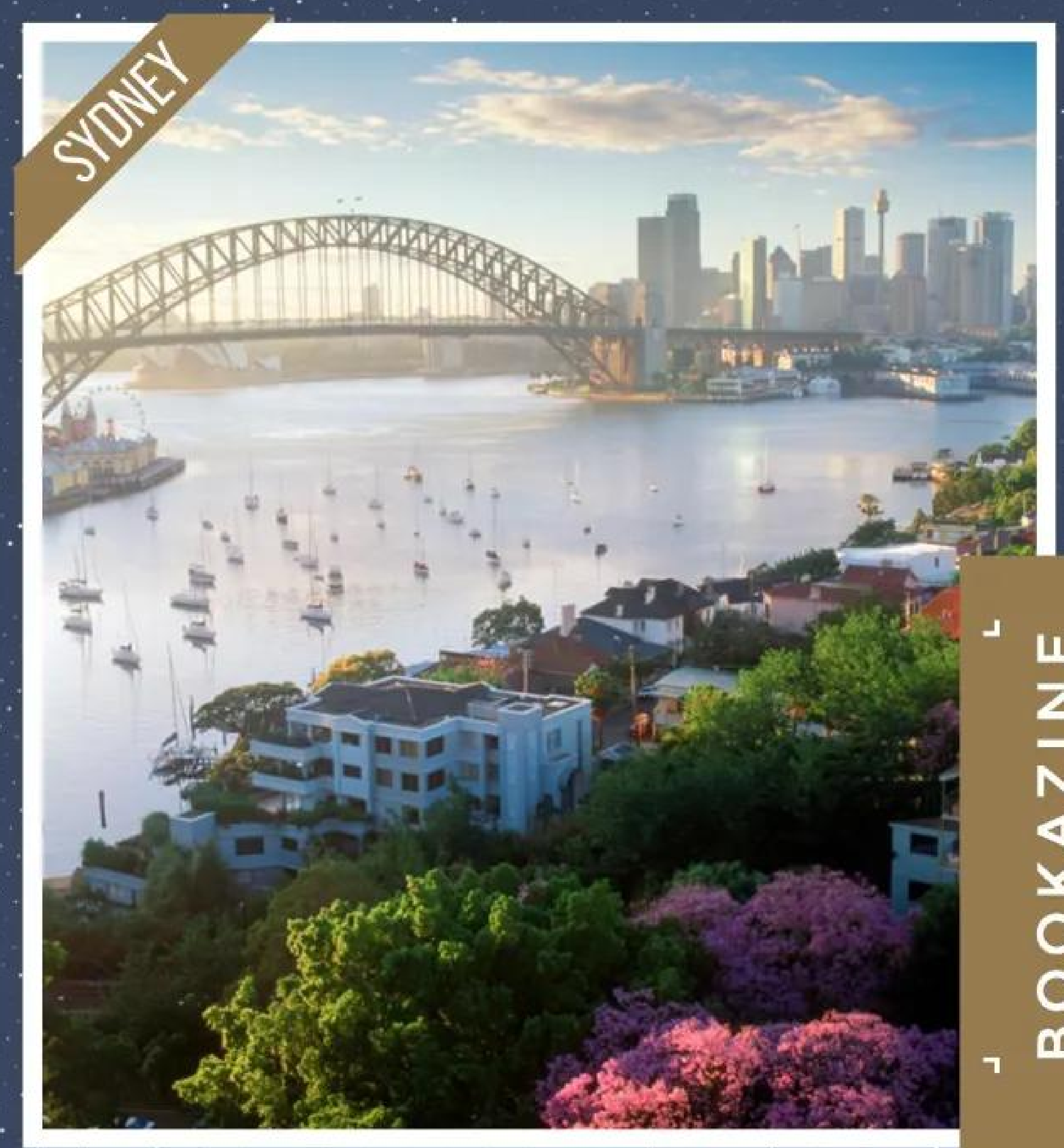


101 PLACES

FOR THE OVER 50S TO VISIT





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